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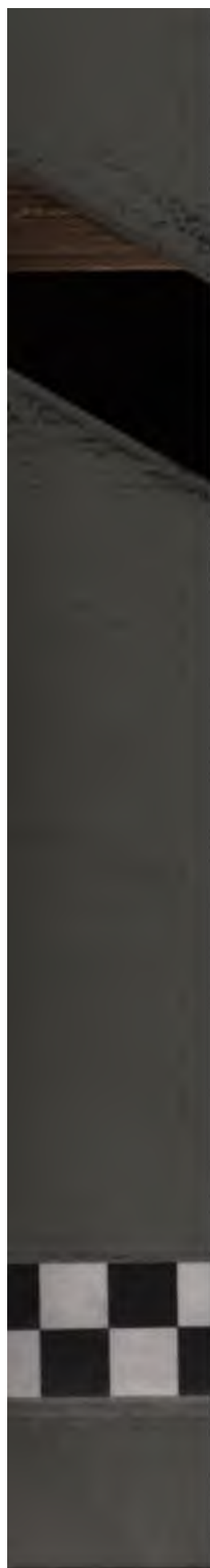
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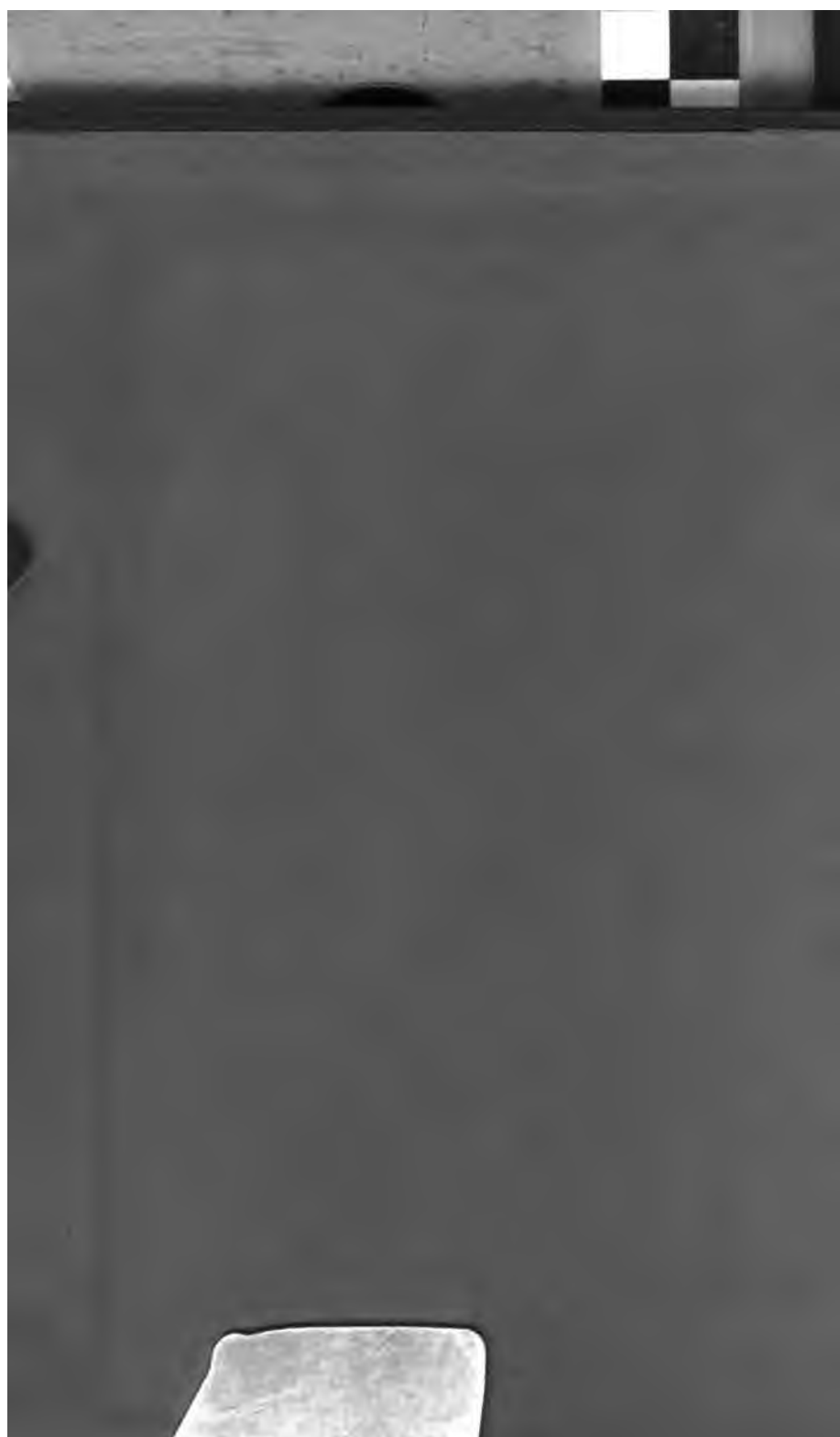
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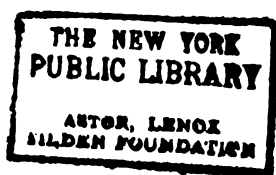
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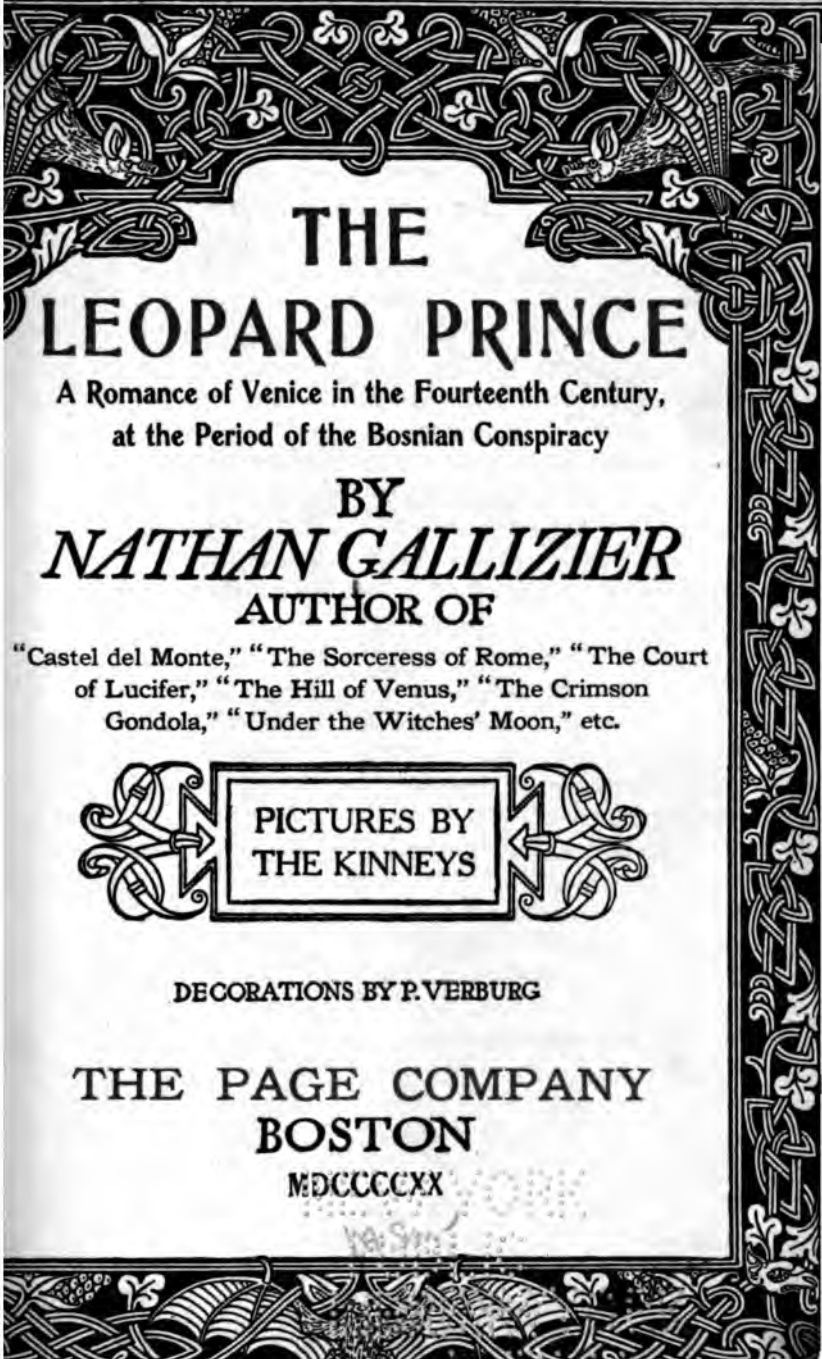






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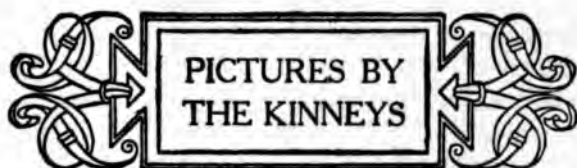


THE LEOPARD PRINCE

A Romance of Venice in the Fourteenth Century,
at the Period of the Bosnian Conspiracy

BY
NATHAN GALLIZIER
AUTHOR OF

"Castel del Monte," "The Sorceress of Rome," "The Court
of Lucifer," "The Hill of Venus," "The Crimson
Gondola," "Under the Witches' Moon," etc.



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" **S**IROCCO hisses on the pane,
Background and bond of lesser sound;
The Lar upon the hearth, the steps
Of household ghosts upon their rounds
Are naught to us. The lamps are lit,
And faint lute-smitten music seems
To float upon the dim lagune
And wake a thousand glittering dreams.

" Hot, blue Venetian water bears
Black gondolas of ghosts, and fire
Neither of heaven nor hell consumes
The galley slaves of dead desire.
Some ripe Sicilian woman holds
Our hearts in hot, hard hands, and white
Mermaidens lure us to their cool,
Dim depths of liquid malachite.

" With gourd-shaped domes and minarets
Some far-flung purple city lies,
Edging a desert over which
The clanging aquilotto flies.
And in carnation gardens toil
Wan porcelain faces damp with sweat,
Till bronze carillions call to prayer
Each Satan-driven marionette."

RANGER GULL.



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BOOK THE FIRST



THE LEOPARD PRINCE

CHAPTER I

THE HAUNTED HOUSE



It was the time of the Vernal Equinox in the year of our Lord 1355.

The night was dark with cold dashes of rain.

Fitful gusts of wind and wan flashes of lightning pursued in its flight towards the sheltering canals of Venice a solitary gondola which sped over the churning waters like a frightened night-bird. The long, black cloak which enveloped the lone occupant of the *felzê* offered most opportunely the shelter of its vast girth and capacious sleeves. For, notwithstanding the rain which lashed his face, he continued to peep between the drawn curtains in the endeavor to catch a distant glimpse of Venice, the dim silhouette of a steeple, the faint outline of a campanile.

But the darkness was profound, the horizon impenetrable. The sky was like a cupola of basalt, streaked with tawny veins. On both sides the lagune, more sombre than the darkness, extended into the vast unknown. From time to time wan flashes of lightning cast their torches upon the water. Then the gondola seemed to ride across empty space like the hippogriff of a nightmare.

The black-garbed gondolier, bending over his oar, sent the frail barque flying over the dark and quivering waters. Grown old and grey in his calling, he knew every wavelet of his

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native lagunes, and his shrill "*Stalé*" warned other craft that chanced to cross his path.

After a time dark cypresses began to trace their shadowy contours above the white terraces of the Zecca. One by one, like giants in the night, belfries and campanili began to emerge from the nocturnal murk. At last they found themselves face to face with one of the most marvelous spectacles ever afforded the gaze of the human eye, the Piazzetta, seen from the sea.

For a moment the ducal palace offered its vermilion façade lozenged with white and rose marble to the bewildered gaze, then the gondola, obedient to the oar, plunged into the depths of the Grand Canal, penetrated the maze of shipping, and emerged in a lightless region, between obscure palaces, where only, now and then, a lantern before the diminutive shrine of a Madonna stung the gloom, casting straggling beams upon the black, mysterious waters.

The gondola entered the narrow water lanes. It passed under bridges both ends of which resembled luminous gashes in the sombre and compact mass of the houses. Strange, guttural cries resounded along the canals. Each door opening upon its water-stairs seemed to admit a lover or a bravo. Each gondola that glided silently past seemed to shroud a corpse with a stiletto in its heart.

Sometimes all the lights were extinguished. Then the gondola passed between the opaque gloom of the nocturnal sky and the oily gloom of the water, on which the lantern on its poop cast a quivering crimson trail, revealing vanishing pedestals, shadowy columns, porticoes and doors.

All objects touched by its wandering ray assumed an aspect at once mysterious, weird and fantastic. The water, always formidable at night, added to the effect by its dull lapping, its restless life. The lights of infrequent street lamps extended in bloody trails, and the waves, black as Cocytus, seemed to spread their complaisant mantle over many a crime.

Once or twice the occupant of the gondola gave a start, as

if his watchful ear had surprised the sound of a body dropping from some balcony into the silent waters of the canal.

The gondola continued its meandering course.

Without apparent goal it darted in and out the labyrinthine waterways, doubling on its course.

At the mouth of a dark, sinister water lane the gondolier ran his craft ashore.

His passenger alighted and after having dismissed his Charon, entered the narrow path that edged along the border of the canal. Keeping a vigilant lookout, the stranger proceeded with quickened steps, as one familiar with his surroundings.

He was tall, carried himself erect, and seemed in the prime of manhood. The face was concealed beneath the habitual satin vizor.

The tall, dark houses on either side of the narrow water lane towered like shadowy Babels. Bleared, lightless windows and black, gaping casements met the eye on every turn, accentuating the desolation.

Sometimes the warning cry of a gondolier waked the silence, or the trained ear might distinguish the splash of a muffled oar.

A sudden turn brought the stranger into a lone, deserted Rio, dark and dismal and forgotten of the living.

In the far distance the stunted towers of Madonna dell' Orto loomed darkly into the night.

Deep, unbroken silence reigned along the channel whose sluggish tide ebbs away in the broader basin of the Rio di Noalé.

The great abbey church of the Misericordia cast its gaunt shadow over the pale rose bridge spanning the narrow cut, and the weird, oriental masonry of the Fondacco dei Mori towered fantastically above the haunted water lane.

Before a white wall surrounding an extensive garden whose tangled avenues of trees and shrubbery looked grim and for-

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bidding in their state of long neglect, the stranger paused, peering furtively up and down the lane.

Seen by the fitful rays of a lantern, that flickered at some distance before the shrine of a Madonna, the tall rows of houses on either side loomed dark and forbidding into the night, as if they were lost in dreams and memories of bygone days.

Two iron gates, covered with a heavy coating of rust, shut in between two pillars of stone, invited him to enter. The fresh green of young creepers, that twisted and twined themselves about the rotting rungs, shrouded the decay with the tender hand of spring.

Nothing was visible on the other side of the gate except the beginning of the path and shadowy thickets, a black ocean of shrubbery, dense and silent and mysterious, intruding raggedly on the weed-grown path.

After a moment's hesitation the stranger entered the deserted garden. The rain had gradually dissolved into a heavy mist which enshrouded the laurel arbor, and clung like a veil about the time-stained walls of the gaunt and grim structure, that towered, dark against the darker background, into the night.

Originally coated with that vivid shade of red, the usual color of the old Venetian houses, the Gothic pile presented a ferocious, almost threatening aspect.

The rain, the fog, the desolation had, little by little, taken the color out of the façade, but a quaint reddish tint still clung to the walls, resembling blood indifferently washed away after a crime. The house presented an appearance at once secret and aloof.

The blind windows admitted not a ray of light, revealed not a trace of life. The low doors, studded with large, rusty nails, and furnished with grotesque knockers of bronze, seemed not to have turned on their hinges in immemorial days. Nettles and weeds encroached upon the threshold, unmolested and undisturbed.

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As he traversed the garden plot the stranger became aware of a curious sensation, as though some one were following, watching him through the trees. The sensation became so poignant, that he turned, peering through the thickets. The sepulchral silence of the Rio was unbroken by sound ever so faint. Nevertheless the sensation remained, and a certain terror and vague alarm was growing slowly upon him.

Taking from his mantle a quaint copper key, he inserted it with trembling fingers in the lock of the low, iron-studded door.

With the grating noise of long disuse it swung inward, sullenly, with a groan.

With bated breath he stood upon the threshold, while one might count a score.

With leaden feet he passed within, locking the door behind him.

In the Stygian gloom that enfolded him, his hands fumbled for his torch. Placing it upon the floor he struck two flints and ignited the wick.

He stood in a vast, dismantled hall.

Raising the torch aloft he permitted its feeble rays to struggle through the gloom.

Nothing could be more dreary than the aspect of the place.

It seemed to have been untenanted for years.

The richly moulded ceiling was festooned with spiders' webs. The squares of colored marbles with which the hall was paved were loosened, and quaked beneath his feet.

A broad, monumental stairway with grotesquely carved banisters led to the upper suites of the habitation. On the landing, out of a massive gilt frame, peered the pale face of a woman with frightened eyes, that seemed to question the intruder, follow his every step, her white, straining face outthrust in the gloom.

With leaden feet, by the fitful light of the torch which threw his broken shadow grotesquely on the floor, he mounted the stairs.

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A corridor corresponding to the one below yawned darkly before him. Down its dusky length shuddered his steps, and every step seemed to be a wrench of icy fear, as if he dreaded to find momentarily the object of his quest.

Torch in hand, like a wanderer in a nightmare, he walked from room to room, as if to assure himself that no one was hidden within. He was in a state of concentrated attention, alert as against some inexorable hostility.

Turning, he retraced his steps, passed out into the corridor and paused before a door opposite the landing.

Immobile he shuddered in the gloom, fitfully illumined by the flickering light of the torch. Afterwards he remembered how, inch by inch, some mysterious power drew his hand to the knob and he was conscious of the physical agony, as cold flesh came in contact with cold metal and gripped it, lacking the power to let go.

Awe-stricken, with a creeping shudder, he listened to his own breathing, then he slowly turned the knob.

What lay beyond that door he knew not, but he felt a dread too great for words, as if beyond that threshold lay the end of things, the end of life, the end of hope — a dread mystery revealed.

Raising the torch to the level of his eyes he entered the chamber, a strange place, full of shadows, of strange, yet familiar objects, phantasmal in the dusk, touching with trembling fingers first one thing, then another, as if to convince himself of their reality.

In the background, behind drawn curtains, loomed a shadowy bed beneath a shadowy canopy.

On tiptoe, as if afraid to wake the phantoms of the past, he stole across the room and peered between the curtains. The bed was undisturbed, untouched.

Retracing his steps he gave a start.

A sound, as of a stealthy footfall came to his watchful ear, and to his nostrils was wafted the pungent odor of jasmin.

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He listened with strangely beating heart, straining his eyes through the darkness.

Heavy shadows lay upon the landing, dense, impenetrable.

Suddenly, as if his presence had waked the silence, the silence began to palpitate.

It is not good to wake the dead!

Men come back to places for secret reasons. More than men come back!

The icy hand of the King of Fear was upon him.

With a supreme effort he controlled himself. Raising the torch aloft he quitted the chamber, walked on to the landing, into the corridor beyond. He found nothing to account for the sensation he had experienced but, as he paused in his investigation, he distinctly heard the sound again.

Then, seized by an unreasoning terror, he fled down the dusky corridor, down the shadowy stairs, past the woman with the white face and the frightened eyes, through the dismantled hall, towards the door, which he unlocked with trembling fingers.

On the threshold he paused with a quick intake of his breath.

"Am I indeed Zuan Castello," he muttered to himself, "or, am I but his ghost?"

At that moment the impenetrable curtain of mist lifted, and the struggling moonbeams flung a spectral path of light across the deserted garden through which, like a wraith, moved the slender form of a woman in dark, clinging robes.

The phenomenon was so startling that his brain reeled. A woman in this place, and at this hour! Even ere he had realized it, her form was blotted out by the condensing mist veils.

The drear echoes, as the iron-studded door crashed to behind him, reverberated through the deserted palace. Utterly dazed, he rushed through the arbor in pursuit of the phantom, and it was only when he found himself beyond its ghostly confines,

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by the bank of the lugubrious canal that, in a measure, he regained his composure.

Questioning the reality of his vision Zuan Castello passed through the narrow sacca without once glancing back at the deserted garden, and the grim and silent palace that loomed dark and forbidding behind its enshrouding curtain of laurels and oaks.

Then he directed his steps towards the Fondacco dei Mori, to spend the night within its more hospitable precincts, among traders from Persia, Armenia and the Levant.

Memories of a past, long dead, crowded upon him like phantom shapes that would not be dispelled.

He dared not trust himself alone in the silence of the night.

CHAPTER II

THE PASSING OF THE GRANDE



ZUAN waked early on the morning following his arrival to find the events of the preceding night almost as unreal as the phantasmagoria of a dream, — to find Venice herself a dream.

During the night, while tossing on his pillow with that restlessness of body which possesses those whose minds are a prey to worry

and care, and which the newness of his surroundings tended to accentuate, he had been beset with strange dream phantoms, in which the present and the past intermingled grotesquely.

In a mood that had not shaken off the dread experience of the night, nor freed itself from the weird dream images that had succeeded, Zuan arose and looked out upon the canal below.

Silently he watched the evidences of awakening life in the narrow water lane, the gliding to and fro of gondola and barge. Boats, laden with timber from the pine forests of the mountains, or with bales of merchandise piled high and packed in symmetrical order, floated slowly with the wind and tide, or were propelled against both by oarsmen at bow and stern.

From afar could be heard the roar of the sea breaking on the shore; the surge of the tide, flowing inland; the whispers of the wavelets as they beat against the walls of the palaces that bordered the canals.

The sun had not yet risen above the Lido, though the eastern

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sky was aglow with his coming. A faint haze hovered in the west, catching the flush from the crimsoning east. And as the mists of night rolled landward before the quickening morn, a snowy line of high mountains stood out clearly, borrowing tints of rose and lilac from the sky, as if the earth vied with heaven in their double welcome of the new-born day.

So splendid with fire and color was the east, that it seemed to Zuan as if the gates of Heaven had been opened and earth and sky permitted to borrow a momentary reflection of the glory within. A curious concentration of light changed the scene from the fiery magnificence of the first moments, and the sea played its part in the festival of nature. The placid expanse of the lagoon became a vast, shining lake of untellable beauty, flashing quivering gleams of color unknown to any brush; a vivid green, where the blue water caught the golden glow, or reflected a mass of seaweeds surging to the tide, in the clear depths below; blue, where the highest dome of heaven, still keeping some of the darker tones of earliest dawn, was mirrored; purple and red and orange and lilac, where the long ripples that started in their troubled course from the cutting prow of a gondola, again found repose in the calm of the farther water, danced in the joy of the sunlight and were flecked with innumerable prismatic tints. The lagoon was changed as if by magic touch into an immense opal, to which ruby and sapphire, amethyst and chrysoprase, emerald and topaz, had given of their own unstintingly.

For a long time Zuan Castello stood gazing out into the awakening day, deeply absorbed in thoughts little akin to the beauty of the sunrise. When, once more, he found himself, the flaming pageant of the skies had passed away before the morning light, leaving an atmosphere of intense clearness in which all things assumed a startling reality and newness; the islands dotted over the surface of the lagoon on either side; the long line of land fringed by the Euganean Hills; and before him Venice, — the City of the Sea.

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After having partaken of a light repast, he summoned a gondola.

“To San Gregorio!”

As he was oared down the Grand Canal he had little difficulty in recalling the men and women who played their part in love and hate, in peace and war, when he looked upon the walls which in time had sheltered them.

Here was the palace of the Faliero, where was enacted one of those grim tragedies of hatred and revenge so frequent in Venice from the earliest times. Here was the palace of Rezonico, which had sent a pope to Rome, and here, too, was the palace of the Contarini, with its old chests that held the enormous wealth of the owners who were destined to give eight Doges to the City of the Sea. Here was the Campo della Carità, where, in the ancient monastery, now the art-treasure house of the city, the supreme Pontiff, Alexander III, took refuge from his enemies and bided his time of triumph. On his right and left alternated scenes of tragedy and records of noble deeds, kept alive by monuments as noble as their names. He passed the palace of the Cornaro and the palace of the Pesaro; here were the homes of the Cavalli, the Veronese, who so valiantly defended Venice against their ancient foes, the Genoese; there was the house of the famous Barbaro, governor of Brescia, at a time when the city was hard pressed by the tyrant duke of Milan.

All around there was beauty and sparkle of sunlight. The ripples of the canal were aflame with ruffled incandescence. Yet Zuan felt instinctively that here lurked a mystery, a menace, such as hovers over a spot where crime has been committed. He felt, if ever the spirits of the dead haunt any place, surely that place must be Venice, not in the daytime, with the sun beating down on the limpid waters of her canals, illuminating the darkest of her narrow *calli*, but at dusk or at eventide, when the mystery of impenetrable shadows pervades the City of the Sea.

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Then surely, if there be truth in the spirit world's existence, must the restless shades of plotter and victim alike return to the scenes of their former lives, peopling the ways and thronging the *campi* with their silent stir, a mighty, restless band, pale and sad, whom wrong had knit together in fellowship of suffering and injustice still provoked to tacit protest by their return to earth in the silent watches of night.

At the landing stage of San Gregorio Zuan dismissed the gondolier, walked ashore, and, threading a maze of narrow *calli* and deserted *campi*, and crossing various canals by their marble bridges, lost himself in the narrowest perhaps of all the narrow *calli* of Venice.

When after the elapse of some hours he came forth, he slowly retraced his steps through the labyrinthine maze of intersecting lanes and emerged on the Merceria, which was comparatively deserted during the siesta hours.

As he made his way towards a *traghetto*, he could not but note the evidences of a secret disturbance, that seemed to affect the minds of the people. Men and women were assembled in groups at the landing stages, conversing in hushed tones. Others loitered with the expectant air of those who seek tidings concerning a matter of uncommon interest.

Mingling with the crowds Zuan endeavored to learn the cause of their strange restlessness. Those he questioned, shrank away from him. Who knew what the mask concealed?

One only made reply and vanished among the crowds, as if repenting of his utterance.

"The Phantom Gondola has been seen on the lagunes. Woe to Venice! — Woe to the City of the Sea."

Evening drew near when Zuan hailed a gondolier and gave the direction. He would return to the lone house in the Sacca della Misericordia. He would know what mystery lurked behind those grim and dreary walls, long deserted of the living.

The Grand Canal was no longer lapis-lazuli, but pale as

PASSING OF THE GRANDE 15

woodland smoke mingling with dark green trees on a summer's evening.

Soft veils, thin and light as gossamer, creeping mysteriously and imperceptibly up from the sea, involved every palace and dome in their insubstantial web. Lights and shadows were toned down to fainter contrasts. The glare of the midday hours had given way to a ghost-like radiance. The ripples of the canal sank once more in the bosom of the waters, whence they had sprung. The wind dropped. It was as if all the realities of life had suddenly become phantoms that were slowly and silently drifting out of sight on some secret tide of the spirit; as though in their place the floating imagery of dream-land had become the sole thing of moment and reality.

In midstream a barge appeared and slowly passed on the flow of the tide, with its lugubrious cortège.

It was followed by a convoy of gondolas, moving slowly to the notes of a funeral dirge. In the first gondola were the musicians, with priests and acolytes holding tapers, and dressed in white and black; one of them stood in the bow with a large gilt cross. In the second barge was visible a raised bier on which lay the coffin covered with a white pall. At the head stood the officiating priest in biretta and camicia, and behind him the Brothers of the Misericordia, in their white robes and hoods pierced for the eyes. Three massive waxen tapers flickered on either side in the breeze, dimly illuminating the dark face of the priest and the cowed forms of the members of the Brotherhood of Mercy. Behind, there came gondolas with lighted torches. As the procession drew near the musicians ceased to play.

After a few moments of silence unbroken save by the slow and rhythmical plash of the oars, Zuan heard the chant of the "Miserere," which rose and fell, as the funeral cortège stole slowly into the darkness between the tall and shadowy palaces, leaving a trail of wavering light behind.

Allowing some moments for the procession to pass on its

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way towards the Cemetery Island, Zuan's gondolier pushed out from under the shadow of the bridge and re-entered the main channel.

"Who goes yonder?" Zuan turned to his Charon.

A strange light beamed in the gondolier's eyes.

"My lord, there goes the Grandé."

His questioner gave a start.

"Mario Calvo?"

The gondolier gave a nod.

"The same, my lord. A collision on the waters at night. His gondola was cut in twain."

"Accidents have happened ere now on the lagunes," Zuan interposed darkly.

"And in the Giudecca Canal," the gondolier replied cryptically.

The mood of his Charon remained not unremarked by Zuan.

"When did it befall?"

"Sometime in the night. The body was washed ashore at San Erasmo."

Zuan gave a grim nod and the gondolier pushed his oar.

"Rio del Carminé!" came the voice from the *felzé*.

The boat shivered like a thing afraid of the dark.

The sun had set.

Dusk wove its phantom veils over the City of the Sea.

From the churches and cloisters of Venice the chimes of the Angelus floated over the dreaming waters, leaving the silence more intense than before.

The muffled lap of the wavelets against the *pali*, the subdued plash of the oar, the faint gurgling of the water as it beat against the sides of the gondola, the murmuring wash of the rising tide, flowing darkly, mysteriously, with whisperings from the sea beyond, were the only sounds to be heard in the night.

At the entrance of the Sacca della Misericordia Zuan alighted, dismissed the gondolier and entered the Rio del Carminé.

CHAPTER III

THE DECOY



THE region was as utterly deserted of the living as a churchyard. Never was there place more suited to some dark deed of mystery and crime.

The night was chill. The moon was hidden by driving clouds.

Wrapping his mantle more closely about him, Zuan pursued his way with quickened steps, till he came to the intersection of two narrow water lanes, where the path turned sharply at right angles.

He had arrived at the entrance of an arched bridge that spanned the canal at this point, when, with a start, he saw the slender form of a girl emerge from the tunnel by the opposite arch.

She walked slowly, with her head bent, along the narrow path where the moonlight fell. Her flickering shadow palpitated before her. The supple lines of her body undulated with every step.

Zuan watched her with grave wonder.

As he had not seen her enter the arch, he surmised she had been waiting there.

She seemed utterly unconscious of his presence and continued her walk without once glancing back in his direction or concerning herself about him.

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Her form was slender and graceful. Her age could hardly have exceeded twenty-two. A dark mantle enveloped her, light and fine in texture, swaying with the motion of her body.

Her incongruous appearance startled him. She had the air of one in whose veins flows gentle blood.

Where was she bound, alone, unattended, at this hour of the night? Why, or for whom, had she come out so late?

Choosing the narrow path along the canal, she proceeded towards a sombre *callé*, framed on both sides by tall, towering houses, revealing a grim and grimy exterior, dark and deserted within. Zuan's wonder increased with his determination to learn the goal of her ramble.

She continued her walk in the same measured gait. Accelerating his own pace, the distance between them imperceptibly diminished.

A sudden consideration of the risk of the venture caused Zuan, for a moment, to hesitate.

Then, prompted by a sudden impulse, resolved to learn the purpose of her presence in this unsavory quarter, he accelerated his steps.

Without heeding his approach, if indeed she noted it at all, the girl continued with that sinuous motion of her body, which he had remarked as she emerged from the arch, preceded by her lithe, black shadow.

Entering a narrow, shadowy lane, she paused before a dark, sinister house.

Inclining her head she seemed to listen at the low, massive door.

Zuan's wonderment increased with every step.

Now she turned, slowly, deliberately, towards him and their eyes met.

They were extraordinary eyes, eyes blue with violet tints, deep and scintillating, moist and weary in tears as in fire, fringed with long, silken lashes.

They looked, these eyes, as the sirens sang. Whoever

passed in their light seemed doomed forevermore. She appeared to be conscious of their power. But she seemed to count even more on the indifference affected towards him.

She seemed to await his coming.

With a show of hesitation, he accosted her.

"I greet you, fair one."

"I greet you also," returned the mocking voice.

"Whither are you bound at this late hour?"

Her hostility seemed to hint at no suggestion of fear.

"I am returning to my abode. Why do you follow me?"

Zuan was conscious of a strange embarrassment, as he replied.

"Perchance it was the desire to protect you —"

She returned a mocking laugh.

"From such as yourself?"

As she spoke, a white arm, gleaming like ivory in the moonlight, stole from the folds of her dark mantle and slowly, with a studied gesture, raised the white satin mask, while her eyes flashed him a silent challenge.

Zuan regarded her with strange wonder.

The abundant chestnut colored hair, with deep shadow laden waves, was wound in heavy coils round the nape of the neck.

The nose was delicate with slender nostrils, that seemed to palpitate above the crimson lips. The face possessed a strange charm, its ivory pallor even enhanced by the shadow of the long, silken lashes and the purple lights of the slightly slanting eyes, which gave the exquisite face a delicious oriental flavor.

"Who are you?" Zuan queried at last, taking courage from the fire of those strange eyes.

"What matters a name?" she laughed. "How many women do you ask this question in a night?"

"Nay, you mistake," he replied sombrely. "A woman is the last thing I sought or expected to find on my way."

"Are you a sleep-walker?" she laughed, dangling the key

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in her white hands, "or, are you a stranger in the City of the Sea?"

"Your sagacity has divined it," he replied, though his statement carried no conviction with the beautiful enigma before him. "But," he continued, "who are you? Will you not tell me?"

His persistence seemed to amuse her.

"Call me — Gulnare."

"Gulnare! I will go with you."

She drew back from him.

"Oh no!" she said with the same mocking smile, revealing two rows of small, white teeth. "It is much too late for such pleasantries!"

"Nevertheless I shall go with you," Zuan insisted.

She shook her head, but the smile remained on her lips.

"Not to-night."

"To-night!"

She gave a shrug.

"Since you so wish it, upon your own head let it be."

Without explaining her meaning, she turned and inserted the key in the lock.

Slowly, as if weary with its own weight, the massive door swung inward. She paused on the threshold, watching him narrowly.

Involuntarily Zuan recoiled before the chill breath that greeted him out of that well of darkness.

"Are you afraid?" she spoke with ill-veiled mockery.

"Lead the way!"

"I will enter — and wait. Follow — of your own accord — if you dare!"

She passed the threshold, turned, and faced him.

Zuan entered. The door closed soundlessly behind them. They stood in Stygian darkness.

A soft, yet firm hand stole into his own and drew him onward. Gulnare spoke not a word. But he felt her nearness, and a

strange sensation stole over his senses under the spell of a faint perfume as of mingled musk and roses which clung to her.

The passage seemed to slope gradually downward.

Once or twice, as if she had divined a question on his lips, a quick pressure of her hand silenced him, ere the words were spoken. Instinctively, now and then, he extended a groping hand, when a dim light appeared in the distance, casting thin straggling beams through the dense gloom, enabling him to realize the horrors of the place into which, with his enchanting guide, he had unwittingly adventured.

On the ground, gleaming ghastly through the murk, he descried the bleached bones of a skeleton and, as he advanced, he fancied he could hear the derisive laughter of Death echoing through these dimly lighted arches.

With a strong effort to control the dread that was upon him, Zuan followed his guide.

"Where are we?" he whispered at last to his companion.

The pressure of her fingers seemed to electrify him.

"At San Sepolcro! Speak not, if you value your life!"

The air was foul and mephitic as in a sepulchre, and the faint ray of light straggled uneasily through the gloom.

She drew him on, towards the point of radiance and he followed, silent, wondering.

Who was this strange creature whose white hand was leading him into an abode of death and terror unguessed of the living?

Even the silent promise of her eyes failed to soothe his perturbed spirit. But resolved to see the thing through, he followed in silence.

They stopped before a stone wall which abruptly closed the passage. The radiance they had perceived during the last stages of their advance seemed to emanate from a hollow shaft concealed in the masonry.

The girl touched a hidden spring. A panel receded and closed soundlessly behind them.

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After descending a spiral stairway, a second panel admitted them into a luxuriously furnished chamber.

It was a fairly large apartment, having divans round three sides of the walls. Silken cushions of vivid colors and designs were strewn about everywhere in picturesque confusion. The few articles of furniture, scant but of a certain elegance, revealed oriental designs, as did the bronze lamp which, suspended by a gilded chain from the low ceiling, shed a subdued light over this strangest of abodes. In a copper brazier smouldered some oriental incense that sent its spiral coils up to the vaulted roof.

No sooner had they entered the chamber than Gulnare's mantle fell from her and she stood revealed to the eager gaze of her companion robed in purple silken tissue which clung caressingly to her girlish form.

Now, the whole daring of the venture flashing upon Zuan, he faced her awkwardly, while she seemed to enjoy his discomfort.

"What a strange abode," he spoke at last, just to say something.

Gulnare turned her eyes upon her nocturnal visitor.

"Since I have removed my mask and permitted you to gaze upon my unveiled loveliness, — may I not ask as much of you, whatever your name may be?"

He hesitated for a moment. Her request was not to be denied. The situation was precarious enough without enhancing its embarrassment.

"Though I have made a vow not to take off this mask till its object be accomplished, I can do no less than my fair hostess."

With these words he raised his mask and, holding his arms in such a manner that, had the chamber contained another inmate, his features would have remained shadowy and indistinct to prying eyes, he approached the girl and, for a moment they gazed into each other's face.

All the color had gone from Gulnare's face, as the man replaced the satin vizor, and the words fluttered from her lips like a lost breath.

"But — you are not he I was to await. Who are you?"

He stared at her blindly, uncomprehendingly.

"Whom did you expect to meet?"

"What is it to you?" she flashed, "who pursue a woman you have never seen, a woman you do not know, to her abode, hoping to find her pliable to your desires? What if I were the woman you think I am and, after having satisfied you, delivered you over to those who rule these shadowy precincts?"

She appeared to him more beautiful in her anger than when she was toying with his passions.

"Who are you then?" he turned to her, astonishment not unmingled with regret in his tones.

She regarded him fixedly, but her voice had lost its acerbity.

"I serve one," she said, in a strangely impressive way, "whom none may gainsay; one whose will is law, whose unspoken word the accomplished deed. Hearken! What do you hear?"

Every vestige of color left the cheeks of the man.

The corridor seemed to swarm with armed men.

"There is no time to be lost," she whispered to him, her voice trembling with anxiety. "The secret passage is your only hope. Follow its windings. It will carry you to safety. And — if you would heed my warning, let no woman ever so beautiful ever tempt you to enter the precincts of San Sepolcrol!"

A terrific crash resounded against the heavy oaken door of the chamber.

Gulnare's trembling fingers groped for the secret spring. The panel opened and closed behind Zuan, just as a tall sinewy form garbed in black, from the black biretta that covered his head to the black satin buskins that shod his feet,

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entered the chamber and the glare of the torches outside revealed a company of masked *bravi*.

Gulnare, more dead than alive, receded against the wall of the chamber, her eyes on the ominous apparition of the nocturnal intruder.

"Are you mad, my lord, that you thus rudely invade my chamber?" she flashed on the leader of the *bravi*. "Whom do you seek here at this hour of the night?"

He upon whom her anger was directed snatched a torch from one of his men and held it aloft, lighting up every recess in the chamber.

Then he turned to the beautiful creature whose frightened gaze followed his every move.

"You are not always so considerate of your lovers' safety, my beautiful Gulnare," he spoke sardonically, then turning to one who appeared to be second in command, he added: "Down the secret gallery, Corbaro! See that not a rat escapes!"

He rushed from the chamber. The echoes of their mailed footsteps died away under the roof of the galleries of San Sepolcro, and deep quiet reigned once more round the gilded bower of its mysterious bird of passage.

A long time after her strange companion of the evening had left her, Gulnare listened, every nerve strung taut, at the shaft through which he made his descent.

Then, with a sigh she extinguished the lamp, and the shadows of night drooped phantom-like over the haunted precincts of the ruinous cloisters.

CHAPTER IV

THE LABYRINTH



AFTER entering the shaft Zuan groped his way down the spiral stairs. At length he arrived at the door by which he had entered. It yielded to his pressure. Had she left it purposely unlocked? Passing out he closed it soundlessly behind him.

He found himself in a dimly lighted corridor which terminated at of stone steps, uneven and worn. These he descended to a dark, narrow slit in the wall, just wide enough for a man.

The walls seemed to have been excavated from the rock, like Erebus.

Going through the narrow slit he groped his way through gloomy gloom, when he realized with a start that he had no way in the inky labyrinth. A solid wall barred his advance.

Changing his steps he tried to regain the entrance.

He passed along the damp stone, probing for a door. Nothing still, with a gasp of terror.

There was no trace of the door by which he had entered.

Nothing in profound darkness. Not a ray of light penetrated the gloomy gallery. He extended groping hands, while he tried to walk in a circle. This again, he discovered, was a dead end. For he walked on and on, through apparently

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endless, tortuous passages, crossed at certain intervals by others, extensive as a catacomb.

Was he going mad?

The silence of the place was uncanny, unnatural.

From time to time he paused to wipe his beaded brow.

He remembered Gulnare's warning.

It boomed in his ears like the knell of fate.

Now he became vaguely conscious of a door being shut somewhere near him. At the same time he discerned the faint glow of a taper at the remote end of the passage.

Towards this radiance he groped his way.

He came to an iron gate that stood ajar and, though unprovided with a light, he could not resist the temptation to explore what lay beyond.

With testing foot and hand he slowly penetrated a dark passage, filled with mephitic stench and rayless as the blackest midnight. Now and then he paused to listen, then he continued his exploration, until, in the far remoteness of the gallery, he again beheld the faint glimmer of the light.

He advanced more eagerly towards it, renewed hope filling his heart, when the glow was suddenly extinguished.

He paused in abject terror.

All about him were the sounds of stealthy footsteps, pattering upon the stone floor of the gallery, not unlike the scampering of rats in an untenanted house.

Now some one was approaching in the darkness.

Doubt, suspicions, dread, crowded in his mind, held him in their talons, paralyzed his energies.

Where was he to turn? What was he to do?

On all sides he now seemed surrounded by these unseen presences, these harbingers of evil. His intuition informed him that they were not the moving bodies of animals, but of human beings of whatever degree, — human beings gifted perchance with as perfect a scent for their victim as was ever revealed by a beast of prey.

Advance and retreat seemed alike cut off. He dared not move, he dared not breathe. Every step might bring upon him the ghouls that infested this labyrinth. Every step might spell his doom.

Too late he regretted having set foot in this abode of darkness, having ventured single-handed into these nocturnal caverns. Two magnetic eyes had spelled his doom.

Could he but discover an exit from this dismal labyrinth!

He was resolved to sell his life dearly. Yet he felt mystified beyond anything he had ever experienced. This network of passages, spreading like a whole city underground, where did it lead to? Where did it begin, and where did it end?

Who was the strange being that dwelt in this abode of darkness?

How long he stood there, he did not know.

The world of realities was slipping fast. He seemed to lose his grasp on the things of earth.

Suddenly an outcry, the outcry of a woman whose very soul is assailed, split the silence. Not from the passage before him, but from somewhere behind him it came, shrieking out of the caverns of the night.

His knees began to quake beneath him. He clutched at the blank wall of support.

Another shriek. More dreadful, more urgent grew the appeal.

Into what pit of hell had he set his foot, through which murder stalked, red-handed, in the night?

His heart seemed to stand still, frozen with horror at these cries. And the mocking echoes shrieked and shrilled, and died away, as the sobbing night wind dies among the trees.

They were dragging a body behind the walls. The cries sank to a moan, then died to silence.

Zuan experienced a sensation of overpowering nausea, like one about to faint.

A blood-red mist floated before his eyes and the floor seemed to rock beneath him, like the deck of a ship.

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Some time elapsed, ere he collected his wits sufficiently to realize that he must act. He was in San Sepolcro; so Gulnare had informed him. Whatever terrors the ruined cloisters held of which his ears and eyes had received ample testimony, there must be some exit other than the one by which they had entered.

But it was some time ere he could rouse himself to action. The terror that was upon him seemed utterly to paralyze his energies. He tried to persuade himself that what he had seen and heard was a dream; a dream — the wild, incongruous events which he had witnessed in so rapid a phantasmagoria. In the midnight gloom which filled the cavern he could only proceed by carefully testing every inch of ground with hand and foot and, after tenaciously groping his way through the mephitic darkness, he perceived in the extreme distance the faint glimmer of a light that seemed to twinkle like a star of hope from without.

Continuing his advance Zuan eventually came to an entrance so completely choked with briars that only those familiar with the haunt perceived a way into it by crawling beneath the matted foliage.

He gained the entrance just as the moon was setting in the plains of the Padovano.

More dead than alive he paused to survey with a comprehensive glance the extensive complex of the ruinous cloisters, within whose walls not even the faintest gleam of a light broke the sepulchral gloom.

Then, inhaling a deep breath, as if to free his lungs from the mephitic exhalations of the subterranean caverns, from which he had escaped in a neck-to-neck race with Death, he looked about to gain his bearings.

Many questions assailed his mind, as with hushed footsteps he sped along the slippery path by the dark canal. Over the bridges of San Cristoforo and San Gregorio, through the deserted Calle di Mezzo, he made his way. A moist wind

ruffled the water. Its blackness seemed to whisper a tale of death.

It was long past midnight when he arrived in the quarter of Rialto and entered a hostelry which bore upon its dirty shield the faded inscription "The Saracen's Head," presided over by a Smyrniote Greek, who boasted the euphonious name of Stefano and catered chiefly to patrons whose pleasure or business detained them until the wee hours of the morning and who were not on speaking terms with the Signori di Notte.

After having arranged for such accommodations as the doubtful emporium afforded, Zuan, preceded by Stefano, climbed the crooked stairs leading to the chamber assigned to him, and soon the events of the night began to melt into faint and indistinct memories.

CHAPTER V

UNDER THE HORNED BONNET



DEEP silence reigned in the dusky apartments of the Doge's palace. Though Venice, even at this advanced hour of the night, was gay in her squares and upon her canals, movement and sound alike were hushed within the abode of the man who, nominally, ruled the destinies of Venice.

A heavy magnificence pervaded the palace. The vestibules were vast, vaulted and massive, the broad stairs rich in marble, the balustrades heavy and ornate. The chambers were imposing in their gilding and sculpture. Vast sheets of mirrors lined the walls, broken by costly tapestries, brought from the East, when Enrico Dandolo and the hosts of the Fourth Crusade conquered the capital of the Byzantine Empire and ransacked its treasures. Hangings of silk and velvet from the looms of Damascus and Balsora enhanced by their richness the almost oriental magnificence. The cool and beautiful floors, strewn with carpets from Smyrna, Schiraz and Edrené, were made of a composition in which all the prized metals of Italy and the East, polished to the last degree, were embedded, thus lending the final touches to the appointments of the ducal suites, in which magnificence and taste vied with each other.

In a stately apartment whose sombre decorations seemed to befit the state of its lone occupant, in a great carven chair,

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before a table, littered with papers, sat Giovanni Gradenigo, the successor of the ill-fated Marino Faliero.

From a high, painted window facing the sea, colored beams of light fell slantwise into the chamber, resting in splashes of lemon and purple upon the smooth, ebony surface of the table, as the late rising moon, sailing up behind San Giorgio Maggioré, shed her pallid beams upon the unresting waters of the lagunes. It touched with soft fingers the rich velvet robe of the Doge and the peak of the hornéd bonnet.

Giovanni Gradenigo was not a very old man, but he was far from strong and robust. Indeed, even at this time, he was slowly wasting away with the disease which was to carry him off a year later. But, as he sat there at the table, bowed and weary, he looked old and worn and tired. His face was colorless. It was the face of one dead, temporarily returned to life, cold and grey and damp.

And yet, though he was ill and seemed quite unfit for labors and duties of any sort, he was in reality unusually keen and shrewd, and capable of unremitting toil. There burnt somewhere within that shrunken, pallid body an astonishingly fierce flame of life and, in the troublesome period of his shadowy régime, when dangers beset the City of the Sea from every side, from Genoa, Hungary, Bosnia and the East, he gripped the rein of office with a hand of iron that struck awe and dismay into the souls of his enemies.

In the massive arch which formed the entrance to the ducal chamber towered two Slavonian guards, each leaning upon a halberd of formidable size, immobile as two statues of bronze.

Giovanni Gradenigo had relapsed into silent musings, and so complete was the absorption of his mind, that he did not heed the entrance of an usher who stood at attention near a minute, ere his presence was noticed.

"What wouldst you, Fabio?" asked the Doge, as his eye rose from the page.

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"Serenity," returned the usher, "he whom you summoned in audience is waiting."

Gradenigo's eyes narrowed.

"In audience, you say — at this hour?"

"The same, Serenity. The one your Serenity expects."

"But — I am expecting no one. What bold pretense is this?"

"I do but repeat the words of him who waits, Serenity."

Gradenigo's face flushed and paled in quick succession.

"This insolence passes all belief," he said at last, while a bright spot burnt on the wasted cheeks of the Doge, and his eye kindled. "What is he like? Some shameless beggar who believes himself wronged? Some office seeker who hopes to attain his ends by devious ways? Tell the fellow to be gone."

The usher lingered.

"Your pardon, Serenity! This is no shameless beggar, but a nobleman —"

"A nobleman?" Gradenigo repeated, stirring uneasily in his chair, while he relapsed into deep thought.

The jealousy of the Venetian patricians on the subject of their prince is a matter of history. He was by situation a mere tool, a puppet in the hands of the *nobili*, who only tolerated his existence because the theory of their government required a visible head in the imposing ceremonies that were part and parcel of the Venetian system, in their intercourse with each other and with other states. He dwelled in the lonely splendors of his palace like a queen bee in the hive, pampered and honored to the eye, in reality but a shadowy representation of the actual rulers of Venice, who swayed the destinies of the Republic. In the attempt to shake off this insufferable yoke Marino Faliero had lost his life.

In his most secret chambers the ruler of Venice was watched and guarded by the secret spies of the Three. Spy-holes in the tapestry revealed his every movement, betrayed his every outspoken thought.

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Giovanni Gradenigo's discomfiture did not arise from motives of fear for his person, but a life-long experience had taught the Doge caution. He well knew that memory had not failed him and he at once suspected some hidden meaning behind a request so unusual. It might be a device of his enemies, who were numerous and active, or, in truth, there might be some justifiable motive to warrant any applicant in resorting to so bold a measure. Times were critical and Death stalked red-handed through the City of the Sea.

Gradenigo's countenance grew troubled.

"Bid two of the officers of the watch come hither," he turned to the usher who was awaiting his sovereign's command. "When I strike the gong, usher in the visitor."

The attendant withdrew, taking care to pass into the ante-chamber by a door that rendered it unnecessary to show himself at once to him who was awaiting his return.

A second attendant made his appearance and was ordered to take his station in an adjoining closet.

Then Giovanni Gradenigo touched the gong and arose, to receive his mysterious visitor.

A first glance at the tall, masked stranger flaunting the escutcheon of Three Leopards Rampant embroidered in crimson upon his sable tunic, seemed to convince the Doge that the usher had spoken truth.

The man who entered was, every inch, a nobleman.

The fact was attested by his gesture, his carriage and his crest.

Giovanni Gradenigo replied in a cold and reserved manner to the homage of the man, who strode into his presence between the two giant Slavonians, and pointed to a chair, at some distance from his own.

The Doge, by the measured and calm demeanor of the man before him, became more and more convinced that there was more to this unusual request than he had anticipated.

Regarding him warily, Gradenigo was the first to speak.

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"The hour is somewhat unusual," he said, noncommittally, and waited.

"Illustrious prince," the stranger replied, "circumstances as unusual prompt the measure. Venice is in grave danger. To hesitate would be becoming a party to a crime."

The Doge gave a start, casting a penetrating glance at the speaker, not unmingled with suspicion and fear. He was weighing in his mind the chances he took in treating with one who might be a spy of the Council, an enemy of Venice, or who might be prompted by motives that shunned the light of day.

The pallid hues of bodily disease were even intensified as he gazed thoughtfully at the man before him whose demeanor betokened a frankness to which the sovereign of Venice had long become unaccustomed in his dealings with those who in reality ruled the City of the Sea.

What new crime had been committed? What new atrocity had come to light, of which he, the nominal head of the Venetian state, remained in ignorance? To admit or to deny was equally hazardous, until he had peered behind the mask, fathomed the import of this mysterious visit.

Accordingly, a pronounced distrust was the keynote of his reply.

"It is well known to you," he resumed querulously, "that matters pertaining to the state are to be laid before the Council. There may be exceptions, instances, where prudence dictates a course not commonly approved by our customs —"

The stranger seemed fully prepared for the Doge's objections. But one circumstance gave him pause.

What unseen listener might be lurking behind those sombre curtains? What unseen eye might be peering through the spy-holes in the tapestry, what unseen ear might be inclining towards the orifices so skillfully arranged in the wall as to baffle the scrutiny of the keenest observer?

He looked about, and the Doge read his thoughts, but his suspicions were far from allayed. If it became known that he,

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Giovanni Gradenigo, had received a stranger in secret audience, what was he to say to the Council? And he remembered the Quirini and Tiepolo and Faliero — and their fate.

Might not this be a snare to lure him into betraying himself?

"My message, Serenity, is not for the ears of the Council, which is sufficient unto itself," the stranger replied after a pause. "Even the hornéd bonnet is not proof against the arrows of death, as your Serenity well knows."

The arrow found its mark.

"Arrows of death?" Gradenigo repeated feebly. "Whence fly these harbingers of evil?"

"From the Isle of Arbé."

Gradenigo bounded up as if he had been stung by an adder and his clenched hand crashed down upon the ebony table, causing the papers thereon to scatter in every direction.

"By San Marco!" he cried. "From Arbé, you say?"

"Venice is in grave danger, from within and without. Serenity — you are betrayed by the very men who sit in your councils. Will you sit idly by and let the City of the Sea become the prey of those who are plotting night and day for her destruction?"

"Your proofs! Where are your proofs?"

Gradenigo was moving uneasily in his arm chair.

"Proofs — for the eye and ear of your Serenity alone! — Proofs, that will destroy your faith in those who pretend to serve you! — Proofs that will destroy you, if there is one present in this chamber besides ourselves, who may hear, or see —"

The Doge touched the gong twice.

The stranger's trained ear caught a sound, as of some one withdrawing. Without waiting the permission of the Doge he arose and walked straight towards the curtain, which had been stirred, as he thought, by a faint breath of air, under the astonished gaze of the Slavonian guards, who momentarily expected to hear the arresting voice of their master.

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But Gradenigo remained silent, following with ill-concealed wonderment the bold step of his masked visitor.

After having convinced himself that there was no listener in the chamber, the stranger returned to his seat.

"It is that matter of Arbé, Serenity!"

Every vestige of color faded from Gradenigo's face. So great was his terror, that he gasped for breath.

"Read, Serenity! The proofs!"

He placed a scroll into the Doge's hand.

Gradenigo slowly scanned its contents. Then, looking up, he turned to his visitor.

"Man, can this be true?"

"It is all over Venice, Serenity. Louis of Anjou is planning another campaign. He has set the Ban of Bosnia on Zara and Spalato. The Dalmatian Isles are as good as lost."

Giovanni Gradenigo's face was as a death mask.

"We shall lose Dalmatia," he muttered, over and over.

Nodding to himself, as if this matter was entirely settled in his mind, Giovanni Gradenigo, closing his pale eyes, sat quite motionless in his big chair. It was as if he had ceased to breathe.

Then, quite suddenly, his eyes snapped open and a swift flame of rage seemed to leap up in the old man, amazing in its fierce unexpectedness. A crimson spot glowed upon each cheek.

"The dog may have Dalmatia," he cried, "but, by God and by my ring of office, I am damned, if he shall have Arbé. I will not give up Arbé. There I want to die!"

"And yet, Serenity, unless we nip this conspiracy in the bud, the Ban will not only have Arbé, — but the other Dalmatian Isles as well, Veglia, Cherso and Lucin Grandé. And there is even more at stake, for Genoa is but waiting to fall upon Chioggia and Louis of Hungary is whetting his tooth for the Trentino."

"Is it likely," Gradenigo wondered aloud, "that the Ban

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will go out of his way to attack the island which strategically is of no value to him? It would be wanton vandalism."

"The Ban will attack — Serenity —"

"And what is that mongrel Bosnian but a vandal?" shouted old Gradenigo. "He will attack, you say? He will do more than that. The dog will lay the town in ashes and give it to his Magyar strumpet, for he knows that nothing would hurt me more. Yet did I not expect the blow to fall so soon."

"Your Serenity speaks true! But a week ago he boasted openly he would set the Princess Yaga on the throne of Venice."

Gradenigo leaped to his feet. The shackles of age seemed to have fallen from him, like chains struck from a prisoner.

"By God! This Magyar wanton dares defy me in my own palace?"

"I say to you, Serenity, the ramifications of this conspiracy reach within these very walls. You are surrounded by traitors and spies and your very dreams are not your own. The Magyar princess sits in the centre of the web. And, as I know her, she will make good her boast!"

Gradenigo had resumed his seat. His fingers thrummed nervously on the shining ebony. The faint light beam had passed from the hornéd bonnet, as the moon rose higher, leaving the head of the prince of Venice in a ghostly twilight.

"It is beyond bearing!" he muttered over and over.

Then the Doge relapsed into a sort of apathy, moistening his blue lips.

"The Ban's Yaga seems to have a grudge against the house of Gradenigo," he muttered. "But," again he lashed himself into fury, "the remedy, man, — show me the remedy, since I may not raise a finger in my own house — in my own defense! I have been ill served — ill served!" he ended with a groan.

The stranger nodded grimly.

"The end is not yet, Serenity. But, — with this war on our hands, — will the Grand Council consent to send aid to Arbé, which, after all is of importance only to a few families?"

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"They shall consent!" cried the Doge fiercely. "Three galleys will suffice —"

"Your pardon, Serenity! — The Grand Council will not consent," the stranger interposed.

Again the Doge started. His eyes blazed.

"Who are you to dispute my word?"

The stranger arose and placed a parchment in Gradenigo's hand.

The Doge scanned its contents. Then a puzzled expression contracted Gradenigo's brows.

"Why have I not heard of you before?"

"The interests of Venice compelled my absence from her shores."

"You have been in touch with events?"

"There have been letters intercepted from those who sit in the Great Council, directed to the Ban —"

"Give them to me!"

"It were perilous to carry the fire that consumes the vessel. They have pledged themselves to withhold their consent to any action prejudicial to their ally. Some have been bought outright; some have been bribed; others are but the blind tools of their leaders."

The grave visage of the man in the decline of years, athwart which worldly cares and worldly passions had drawn those deep lines which no subsequent resignation can erase, grew even more perturbed.

"Then we shall act without them," he said at last, as if he had taken sudden counsel of himself, culminating in a resolve upon which hung life and death. Turning to his visitor he said:

"Remove your mask!"

The stranger obeyed and the Doge scanned the features of the man. Whatever he read therein, it struck into the tired soul of the old man the conviction that he who stood before him was no traitor.

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Gradenigo extended a withered hand. Bending over it, his visitor reverently kissed the Doge's ring.

"What is your request?"

"Mario Calvo, the Grandé, has gone to his reward."

Gradenigo gave a start.

"You would sit in his place?"

"With absolute authority — accountable to none."

"A bold request," Gradenigo squirmed.

"Prompted by the crisis of affairs."

Old Giovanni Gradenigo drummed with bony fingers upon the ebony table, and again the two spots of vivid scarlet came out upon his sunken cheeks.

"I will not lose Arbé!" he said for the third time. "How will you accomplish this thing?"

"The Signori di Notte, the keeper of the Arsenal, the master of the galleys and the surveyor of the port are to take their orders from none save myself, backed by the authority which your Serenity will graciously bestow upon me during the tenure of this office. The hour shall find us ready."

"The danger is great," Gradenigo interposed with a nod.

"On whom can you count to aid you in this work?"

The stranger raised his arm impressively.

"I stand alone!"

Giovanni Gradenigo had dropped wearily into his great chair. All signs of life had faded from his face, and he looked more than ever like a corpse.

At last he rose.

"I know not what moves me to this step," he said, coming towards his visitor and placing his hands upon his shoulders.

"Your path is beset with dangers. You are walking in the crimson halo of your office. I will not lose Arbé! By what name shall you be known?"

"The Leopard Prince!"

Gradenigo tottered to his chair.

He tried to raise one feeble hand, as if in token of dismissal,



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but the hand dropped back upon the carved wood of the arm chair with a sort of dry rattle, and his mysterious visitor left him so, still, silent, deathly, with the bars of colored light from the high lancet window slanting across his velvet robes in billets and lozenges of vert and gule and azure.

CHAPTER VI

THE ELYSIUM OF THE SEA



BRIGHTER day than the one that succeeded the events recorded in the preceding chapter never dawned upon the burnished domes, the gorgeous palaces, the glittering canals of Venice.

Out of a veil of tenderest blue, soft as mist cradled in translucent vapors, rose the City of the Sea, like a dream of marble and rose.

Over everything hovered a wonderful brightness. It bathed the domes, the cupolas, the belfries, in an exquisite luminousness, revealing their spires and pinnacles in trellised daintiness, more like lace than stone.

The sun had hardly risen above the low level of the Lido, when the strains of horns and trumpets resounded from the Piazza of San Marco. They were answered in vibrant echoes from the distant Arsenal. A thousand gondolas with tapering sides and gaily colored canopies flashed over the green and gold flecked surface of the water, stealing in every direction across the port, the Giudecca and the various outer channels, while the well-known routes from Fusiné and the neighboring isles were dotted with endless lines of boats, urging their way towards the City of the Sea.

The Venetians had assembled early, in their holiday attire, while thousands of *contadini* landed at the different bridges, clad in the gay costumes of the main.

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Before the hours of morning had well advanced, all the avenues leading to the Piazza were thronged with a motley crowd, and when the sonorous bell tones of San Marco sounded their peals, the two squares teemed with countless maskers and merry-makers. From every belfry and campanile waved the image of the Wingéd Lion, every palace was rich with hangings of tapestry and silk, floating from window and balcony.

The crowds increased as the morning wore on. The vast plains of the Padovano seemed to have given up their people to swell the multitudes. A general movement had already taken place among the shipping, and a wide, clear channel was being opened from the quay at the foot of the Piazzetta to the distant sand barrier which shut out the waves of the Adriatic.

It was an event of no mean significance which had induced the Venetians to issue forth at this early hour, to discard their morning siesta and abandon their palaces, to assemble in their great square, by the Grand Canal.

Evil tidings have their own trick of spreading. One cannot bury them. The news which had come secretly to Venice, was known in two hours from the Giudecca to Madonna dell' Orto. Before noon it was at Murano.

Almost every one in the lagune city knew that King Louis of Hungary, young, unscrupulous, ambitious, had taken umbrage at the looting of a merchant vessel in Venetian waters and was despatching an envoy extraordinary to the Seignory, to arrange for an indemnity, while, under the cloak of diplomatic discussions, he was preparing a second invasion of the territories of the Republic.

Giovanni Gradenigo, old and worn and tired, had been elected to office hard upon the Faliero conspiracy, partly, because his name ranked among the very greatest in Venice, — two scions of his house had worn cap and ring within the past century, — but chiefly, because his sympathies were as

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remote as possible from the liberal views of the poor old man who had expiated his crime between the two granite pillars, by the margin of the sea. He was patrician above all and fiercely tenacious of his patrician rights, fiercely proud of his patrician name and the prestige of his house, fiercely jealous of the glory of the Venetian state.

Nevertheless the danger which, like a thunder cloud hidden beneath the horizon, menaced Venice from afar was even greater than that which she had faced in the days of her fiercest conflicts with Genoa, her powerful rival on land and sea.

It was known that the Ban of Bosnia, the secret ally of the King of Hungary, coveted not only the possession of the coast cities of Dalmatia, Zara, Sebenico, Spalato, Ragusa and Durazzo, but that his greed extended even to the Dalmatian Islands, Veglia, on the north, Cherso and Lucin Grandé on the west, Pago, on the south and Arbé, where dwelled in their summer palaces the great families of Venice, bound by ties of marriage to the great Arbesian houses, DeDominis, Nemira and Zudeneghi, and who had built on the island villas and campanili and churches as beautiful as any by the Grand Canal. And while the envoy of the Magyar king came with protestations of friendship, the Ban was preparing to seize his prey.

Thus, to-day, all Venice was afloat in gondolas and barges, gazing out to sea where, dimly visible, at Malamocco, a great galley rode at anchor, from the masthead of which, in the soft morning breeze that ruffled the lagunes, floated the proud sea-green banner of the Magyar king.

Even now, up from San Clementé, the Bucentaur was advancing with resounding strokes of oars, the Lion of the Adriatic on her fluttering standard. Like some golden swan of powerful pinions, surrounded by thousands of gondolas and barges, she seemed, as she lifted her proud, royal head on high, to lord it over a jubilant multitude which had arisen, with glittering heads, from the deep abysses of the sea.

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The morning sun was pouring his fiery rays upon the lagunes. Everything was steeped in a flaming radiance.

In the wake of the barge of state rode five richly decorated galleys, convoying the Magyar envoy, prepared for the occasion by the Podesta of Chioggia and under the command of his son, Taddeo Giustiniani.

The people of Venice, in the enjoyment of the pomp, forgot the gravity of the hour. The Wingéd Lion which had protected them against the Doria, the Saracen, the Moor, would protect them against their present foe.

The lagune, boundless and mysterious, clasping the city in its supple embrace, had vanished. It was covered with a thousand galleys, peottas, barges, skiffs, feluccas and levan-tines, gondolas twined with flowers and swathed in colored bunting. The Grand Canal had become a moving carpet of silk, satin and velvet. Brocades trailed in the water, gold fringes were steeped in the broken mirror of the estuary. The airs of the musicians, the cries of the gondoliers, the flashing of gilded oars, the hum of a thousand voices, representing every tongue under the sun, added to the kaleidoscopic confusion, that roared and surged around the silent and stately palaces which rose monumentally from the watery element.

From time to time the watchman on the summit of the Campanile would sound a signal. Then the bells of San Nicolo on the Lido and the churches of the Zatteré would ring out, seconded by the chimes from San Pietro in Castello and San Giovanni in Bragora, while on the horizon the galleys of the Republic came into view, the Lion of San Marco in the field of azure waving proudly in the sunlit air.

Sudden life seemed to permeate the stagnant mass of shipping that congested the mouth of the Grand Canal. Orders rang out; there was a coming and going of gondolas, galliots and barges, black boats from the islands, fishing boats from Ragusa, an assemblage of strange craft and stranger types of humanity.

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Round the water-stairs of the Piazzetta, directly in front of the Doge's palace, a scene presented itself to the gaze of the onlooker, worthy of the court of some Eastern potentate.

Arabesques of gold on glowing tapestries, displaying gods and goddesses and club-footed sylvan divinities, half men, half beasts; flower-laden gondolas, representing Venus in her triumph, Apollo in his chariot; Asia carrying Cathay into bondage, Venetian galleys scouring the Black Sea, or defeating the pirates of the Narenta, the Great Khan receiving Marco Polo and his companions, — met the bewildered gaze on every turn.

And indeed, not since, less than a century ago, the great Venetian explorer had returned to his native city of the lagunes, laden with the spoils of two continents, had a reception like unto this been tendered to any guest or ambassador setting foot on Venetian soil.

In the space extending from the Piazzetta to the Canal of La Paglia were assembled the artisans and the *arsenalotti*, the Canons of St. Mark and St. Peter, the Patriarch and his sumptuous train, carrying torches, spears, candelabra, gold and silver candles, joined by the nobles, the men from Poreglia, and the men from Santa Maria Formosa.

Beneath the balconies, draped with cloth of gold, resting on their halberds, was revealed the Dalmatian bodyguard of the Doge.

Long lines of senators and nobles, the members of the Council of Forty and the Council of Ten, arrayed in the magnificent robes of their office and attended by a numerous throng of their liveried followers, were seen emerging from under the dusky arcades of the ducal palace, and proceeding in due order of their rank to their allotted stations.

The bells of all the churches and cloisters of Venice clashed together in a tempest of sound as, below San Giorgio Maggiore, in the Giudecca Canal, headed by the Bucentaur, there appeared a water cortège, attended by a flotilla of gondolas,

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sandolos and barges, such as might have preceded the entrance into Venice of Marino Faliero, after he had vanquished Morbassan, or the Grand Admiral Francesco Pisani, after his brilliant victory over the Genoese in the great battle off Chioggia.

Four barges rode in the wake of the Bucentaur.

In the first barge were the musicians. In the second and third barges were priests and acolytes, in gorgeous vestments, the Hungarian magnates in their national costumes of green damask coats, trimmed with fur and vair, and feathered caps; in the fourth barge rode the Venetian dignitaries from the outlying isles. In the stern of the barge, on throne-like chairs of velvet and gold, sat the bishops in copes and mitres, with ministering priests and attendants.

It was a scene befitting the mediæval pomp and splendor of Venice. The vestments of the priesthood flashed gorgeously in the morning sun, the jewelled mitres and croziers rivalling the dancing lights of the water. The canal, crowded with gondolas and barges; beyond, the broad avenue of the Piazzetta, flanked by palaces, the towering Campanile and above, the dazzling blue of a cloudless sky — it was a picture representative of Venice, the City of the Sea.

A great shout went up, as, amidst a new fanfare of trumpets and clarions, the gorgeous aquatic pageant came sweeping on in a solid phalanx, expanding fanlike round the great barge of state, so as to witness the discharge of her distinguished guest.

Assisted by two pages in slashed orange and crimson doublets, the half-blind Doge, Giovanni Gradenigo, and his suite entered the flat barges, covered with gaily colored canopies, above which, in the sun-fraught air, floated proudly the Lion of San Marco. A few moments later they were seen ascending the water-stairs of the Piazzetta.

Closely in their wake strode the envoy of the Magyar king, Count Stephen Bela, with his suite, amidst the discordant

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sounds of drums, cymbals and fifes, the clash of steel, the gleam of swords, a bewildering medley of waving plumes, leopard skins and Magyar kolpacks.

Under the waving gonfalons and banners of the Loredan, Morosini, Celsi, Venier, Contarini, Giustiniani, Cornaro and Cornér, past the serried ranks of the Dalmatian bodyguard with its forest of halberds, the magnificent cortège swept up to the great portals of the ducal palace, where the envoy of royal Hungary was to present his credentials to the Doge, then, in befitting pomp, to be assigned to the now tenantless palace of Marino Faliero, by the Ponte dei Santi Apostoli.

In the hubbub and confusion attending the pageant and state ceremonial none heeded a large six-oared barge which approached the lagoon city at a speed, as if its rowers were contending for the prize in the regatta, crossed the main channel, and, entering one of the remoter water lanes, was lost to sight.

CHAPTER VII

MESSENGERS OF EVIL



THE waning moon was rising late through the veils of the sirocco.

Along the narrow footpath by the Orfano Canal two men were stealthily shaping their course, keeping well in the shadow of the dark, overhanging houses.

So far as could be discovered by the faint light of the moon, the appearance of the twain

argued not much in their favor.

The cheeks of the taller were bloodless, but they betrayed rather the pallid hues of mental than of bodily disease. The perfect condition of the physical man was sufficiently attested by the muscular development of the body, which, light and active, gave every indication of great strength.

A doublet of dark velvet and a Montero cap, with other vestments of similar fashion, composed his attire.

His companion was considerably shorter, broad-shouldered, bowlegged and altogether a very formidable ruffian. He had high cheek bones, pointing to Slavic descent, an aquiline nose and a coarse mouth and chin. He boasted a stubby red beard, sandy hair, white eyelashes and brows.

This worthy carried a club which he alternately swung in a playful fashion, or rested upon his shoulder.

His companion concealed something under his jacket, which might have been a dirk.

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Not a word passed between them as, keeping a vigilant lookout they trudged on with quick, shambling steps. Few sounds were audible in this deserted region. Now and then a plash in the water betokened a passing craft. Else the silence was profound.

The dark, gloomy Lombard structures on the opposite canal bank seemed to accentuate the gloom, but the ghostly moonlight bathed with pallid rays the red brick tower of San Mosé. Beyond, the canal seemed to sink down into a perspective of lofty palaces, rose-colored at the top, green at the bottom, their gables steeped in moonlight, their basements sunk in the water; Moorish lancet windows, reflecting the beams of the moon, pinnacles, crowned with statues, detaching themselves in white relief upon the azure night sky; mooring posts and boats, stationary, or grazing with their black sides the white marble of the water-stairs, alternately met the eye.

Beyond this point the world of habitation seemed to vanish in the misty haze of the moonlight.

The two, however, paid scant heed to their surroundings.

Arrived at one of the numerous bridges that spanned the canal, they, as by previous concert, quitted the path and plunged into a dark and narrow lane.

"It is useless," observed the shorter of the twain in a grating, unpleasant voice, "to try to coax a snake into a net. He is too wary to come where there is the smell of blood —"

"I cannot answer for another," replied his taller companion. "But, if his own word is to be taken for it, he is certain to come! I heard him say so, as plainly as I am speaking to you now."

"And, that was at the fourth hour of the night?"

"Even so!"

"And whom did he say it to?"

"To himself, I suppose. For, as I told you before, I saw no one with him."

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"Think you he is one of our profession?"

"Certainly not!" rapped the taller. "Would we waste our time on such a one?"

And with a comprehensive gesture he imitated the slashing of a man's throat with a knife.

"That's no reason at all!" snarled the shorter. "Many a velvety noble practices in our profession. But, he can't be in his right mind to come to a place like this, and at this hour. Besides — wherefore does he come?"

The taller gave a shrug.

"As for that, I can't say — nor does it matter, as far as we are concerned."

"Except — you are sure it wasn't a ghost? I have heard it said that this here crib is haunted and, — though I fear no living man — a ghost's a different sort of patron."

"You'll find him real flesh and blood enough, depend upon it," replied the taller. "You don't suppose he who sent us is out for tickling spirits?"

"He'd hang us on the gallows like so many onions on a huckster's string, if we failed him," rejoined his companion.

The taller gave a nod.

"He is of that godly school of villainy which when it has wrought the deed flings away the instrument. He would gladly welcome a pretext to be rid of us."

"Were we not too deep in his secrets?"

"What is it to you?" snarled the taller. "What you do, in his service, shall not burden you. The truth is — the friar knew too much."

"He will shrink out of this business some way and betray us, even without pointing to us. What are thirty sequins against the prospect of the gallows? Have you ever pondered that, Sordello?"

"Silence, fool! Have I not warned you? Who knows who is abroad?"

"I don't care the plash of an oar," sulked Ruffo. "Will it

please you to remember that you are as deep in the mud as I am in the mire? ”

“ I often marvel how so great a coward became so great a villain,” Sordello rapped. “ What is there in it all to give you the shivers, man? What’s a man or a monk anyway, when he comes to die? Look at my hands! Curse them! Am I shivering? ”

“ Besides, you villain,” he continued, lashing himself into fury, as if to unburden his own soul of some dark deed, “ dare you pretend that I had any part in the actual murder of the Servite friar? That I had even an inkling, who he was, when I consented to the deed? ”

“ Had I? ” Ruffo retorted viciously.

“ Who held the victim? ” growled Sordello.

“ And who wrung his neck like a barn-door fowl? ” Ruffo spurted, grey with rage.

“ Who stunned the old man with a blow hard enough to fell an ox? ” Sordello retorted, his eyes red with murder. “ Not that I blame you for it,” he added sardonically. “ He had to die some way. Those who know too much always do.”

“ You might whisper a word in the friar’s ear, who has been despatched here by the Holy Father.”

An unpleasant smile curved Sordello’s lips.

“ Don’t sicken me with your hypocritical cant. I grant you we did it all in good faith, so let it go to pave our way to cheat the devil. We serve a master who will not save those who cannot save themselves.”

“ But — shall we not one day be betrayed by a finger pointing to us in the dark? ”

Sordello stared at him sullenly.

“ We shall take such care, my man, that at the final reckoning we shall stand gloriously acquitted! ”

“ The cornered beast fights for life with no thought, if it be fair or foul,” Ruffo scowled, ill at ease. “ There is the Interdict! ”

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"What of it?" Sordello snarled contemptuously.

"Have you a mind to hang without a father confessor by your side, and to go straightway to Hell, to burn eternally?"

Sordello shrugged. Even his own soul quailed before the prospect hinted by his companion.

"'Tis a hazardous game, I know — but it must be played," he replied, though his tone lacked conviction.

Ruffo pondered, as if trying to discover an escape out of the dilemma. The sequins still tinkled in his pocket.

"'Tis marvelously convenient," he opined at last, "to call murdered men suicides."

"You may, some day, find it so," Sordello replied coldly.

"But remember, a murderer's shoes are always red, and leave tracks which, sooner or later, lead between the pillars."

There was a brief silence.

Sordello gripped his poniard.

"Think you he will come?" Ruffo turned to his companion.

"Of a certainty he will! He is one of those sorry gallants who cannot resist the rustling of a woman's gown."

A distant bell was tolling the hour.

"Hark! Some one is coming down the lane."

They listened.

"It was the wind."

They crept along the side of the lane that was steeped in shadows, and crossed over, whenever they came to a lamp. By and by, two watchmen — *Signori di Notte* — were to be seen emerging from an adjacent cut and, as the guardians of the night drew near, the *bravi* crept into a hidden doorway. After their steps had died to silence, they ventured forth again and, quickening their pace, came to a row of tall and dilapidated houses. This seemed their destination.

The range of habitations, more than a score in number, was indeed in a sad and ruinous state, frequented by smugglers, thieves and *bravi*, who crept thither in daytime, plying their nefarious trade under cover of night.

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The aspect of the place was so dismal and menacing that it was avoided by all whose business did not compel them to traverse this sinister quarter after nightfall.

Skulking along the black and dreary masonry they came to a sudden halt.

Sordello, shading his eyes, peered up the lane and nudged his companion.

"What do you see?"

Two shadows appeared in the narrow cut.

The one was a man, slender, well proportioned.

The other was a woman.

"If he's walking in his sleep he has found company," Ruffo muttered facetiously.

Sordello's hand tightened about the hilt of his poniard.

"There!"

The man and the woman had stopped midway in the lane. The man started to go. The woman clung to him as if to detain him.

"Why have you brought me here?" they heard him say.

The woman's answer was lost, but she retained her grip.

"I don't half like it," muttered Ruffo.

"What are you afraid of?" Sordello spat viciously.

The moon was hidden behind a bank of clouds.

Now a strange thing happened.

A second shape entered the lane, that of a man. He was wrapt in a sable mantle upon which there was embroidered, in flaming crimson, the device of Three Leopards Rampant. Even ere those in the lane realized the vision, he had vanished, as if the ground had swallowed his sinister form.

The woman uttered a piercing scream, turned and fled back into the darkness. Her companion, veering like a somnambulist, came on, apparently unheeding of his surroundings.

Suddenly he turned, as if scenting danger.

At that moment, a dull, crushing blow descended upon his head and he fell bleeding and senseless to the ground.



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On the following morning all Venice stared aghast at the tidings of the night. Stelio, the heir of the great Venetian house of the Celsi, had been decoyed into a lone *sacca* by a mysterious woman, and had expired under the blows of two *bravi*, his fair companion leaving him to his tragic fate.

But, as if one surprise were not enough, another awaited the Venetians, as the grey dawn streaked the sky behind San Giorgio Maggiore.

The headless trunk of Ruffo, the bravo who had dealt the death blow, swung by its feet between the two rose granite pillars of the Piazzetta.

CHAPTER VIII

THE LILAC DOMINOS



THE sun had set behind the purple-crests of the Euganean Hills and the moon had risen above the low barrier of the Lido. From the churches and convents of Venice, from Santa Maria Formosa to San Giovanni in Bragora, floated the chimes of the Angelus.

As the hours of the night advanced, a vast crowd in mask and domino came pouring out of the narrow streets and lanes into the Piazza of San Marco: senators in their purple robes, nobles in scarlet *tabarro* mantles, severe ascetic merchants with their quaker-like wives and daughters, brocaded courtesans and dare-devil adventurers from every part of the globe; the ribald scum of the Piazza of San Marco, the simple patriarchal fisher folk of Torcello, blustering gondoliers in red sash and loose jacket, soldiers from Dalmatia, seamen of the galleys, jewellers from the Rialto, traders from the Levant.

Greeks and Epirotes in plaited skirts and tall Phrygian caps mingled with the masked throngs and, here and there, might be seen the quiet, black-garbed form of a familiar of the State Inquisition, treading his way through the shifting crowds.

The Piazza, the Piazzetta and the Mole were covered with a mushroom growth of booths and stalls, placards upon posts, pennants waving in the air from tapering poles.

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The two squares, smooth as huge ballrooms, enclosed by the lace-like stonework of the Procuratié and the ducal palace; the arcades, bright with the yellow light of the jewellers; the bronze and glass shops; the gilded and painted taverns, crowded with loungers in mask and domino; the indistinct shapes and colors of the Basilica of San Marco, with its sculptured stories of fantastic pillarets and cupolas and gleaming gold and mosaic; the vermilion façade of the ducal palace facing the hazy sea; the great belfry shooting up into the dim, moonlit sky — it was a scene before which the festivals of Delhi, Pekin and Cairo faded into insignificance.

From the Merceria to San Geminiano the people debauched upon the Piazza. Night had been turned into day. The great palaces had been deserted as too sombre for the frivolity of the hour. The people had taken up their abode under the arcades, before the shops, by the banks of the Grand Canal, near the Broglio, where the nobles spun their intrigues, or at the great public gaming tables, the Ridotti.

Strings of colored lanterns danced and quivered in the air. It was an orgy of color, a pandemonium of jollity, shot with the somersaults and swollen by the reed pipes of all the brag-garts and burlesques in the world.

Upon a hundred booths were shown a hundred marvels. All Europe, all the East, had poured their habits, their jargons, hither. Here met all vagrants, all mountebanks.

From the holds of the merchantmen, from the rows of casks along the quay, rose odors of far-away things, of things scorched by the sun,— of kaf and musk and frankincense. Over all brooded the faint perfume of the Orient.

And ever and anon the ghostly gondolas brought to shore their human cargoes or took aboard their freight of laughter.

Not since the days when Venice had first risen resplendent upon her islands had the Piazza and the canals presented so bewildering a sight. Never had Venice, strange, weird, beautiful, half oriental, half occidental, so thoroughly maintained

her renown as a city of gorgeous color and mysterious shadows, resembling the magic realm of some fabled caliph, as on this memorable occasion, when her horizon was clouded from north to south, from east to west, grave dangers menacing the possessions, the very existence of the proud Queen of the Adriatic.

Unheedful of the oracle, unheedful of internal conspiracies, she had wrapped herself in the gorgeous, glittering tinsels of the Fairy Morgana, trusting in her magic and her secret power which had never deserted her, even in her darkest hour.

From the quay of the Sclavonians to the Lido, from the region of Rialto to where the Grand Canal flows into the basin of San Marco, the water resembled a fantastic, moving carpet, covered with gondolas, galleys, barges, peottas.

The mighty range of palaces glowed as with the white heat of a conflagration. Seen from the water-stairs of the Piazzetta it appeared like the dream of some oriental potentate, a mysterious, unfathomable chaos, the spires and towers resembling huge hieroglyphics, traced upon the transparent night-sky by the invisible hand of a Titan.

In the background, pale grey and dim purple, the low Asiatic domes of the Basilica of San Marco, like a mirage of the desert, rose upon their walls in the repose of a thousand years, overshadowing the conquered ensigns of Candia, Cyprus, and the Morea, whose slender flagstaffs cut the air in phantom fairy lines.

The base of the Campanile lay in shadow, but a hundred feet of its grey summit received the full rays of the moon whose mellow glow bathed its eastern façade.

At the extremity of the Piazzetta, near the margin of the sea, the forms of the Wingéd Lion and the patron saint of the city, each on its pillar of African granite, were distinctly to be traced upon the dark background of the indigo night-sky.

It was near the base of the Campanile that a solitary masker, garbed in a lilac-colored domino, was watching the antics of

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two Smyrniote tumblers, who were entertaining an appreciative audience with their strange contortions.

Now and then he cast a fleeting glimpse over the grotesque and fantastic scene, with the air of one to whom the pageant is redolent with ever new surprise and interest.

He was not however permitted to follow his observations at his own leisure, for he was at once beset by merry intruders upon his solitude, who accosted him in the most varied shapes and disguises.

Striped gowns and pointed caps, turbans, cloaks of motley-spangled finery, the whole wardrobe of folly, the whole panoply of laughter surrounded, mocked and challenged him.

Carried along on the crest of the human wave that swept over Piazza and Piazzetta, the Lilac Domino regained his bearings before the booth of an Armenian, whose pretense to a knowledge of the occult and supernatural was convincingly proclaimed by a placard of red silk, adorned with many strange, cabalistical designs.

The pavilion stood somewhat apart from the other booths that clustered, with their gaily painted canopies, round the base of the great Campanile.

Suddenly the heavy curtains were thrust aside by one whose precipitate exit made a collision inevitable. Both reeled and well nigh lost their masks in the impact.

With a muttered imprecation the late patron of the Armenian recoiled, in the effort to readjust his mask, and, for the space of a moment, the twain stared at each other as if each had found himself face to face with a phantom.

Their amazement seemed indeed well justified, for each beheld his own double, to the minutest detail in make-up, even to the shade of their lilac dominos.

"By San Marco and Teodoro — which one of us is the other?" exclaimed the first comer curiously scanning the other.

"I should know that voice if it came from the grave,"

came the startled reply. "Am I not addressing the lord Zuan Castello, who disappeared one night from Venice as utterly as a ghost at cock's crow?"

Zuan gave a start, then extended his hand in greeting.

"Lucio Strozzi, as I live!" he exclaimed, taking in the other's ensemble from head to toe. "Fate is indeed kind to me to-night."

"Fate is accountable for much," Strozzi interposed with a mirthless laugh, grasping the proffered hand. "But is it really yourself?"

"Death would have none of me, notwithstanding the good offices of my friends!" Zuan replied sardonically.

The other nodded gravely.

"I will not jest with you about death. It may be waiting for either — or both of us, this very night! Yet at San Michelé they point your grave!"

"At San Michelé? Tell me more! Do I repose in consecrated ground?"

"In consecrated earth, though no tablet proclaims your virtues," Strozzi chimed in with his companion's lurid mirth.

"They are probably too numerous to mention," Zuan remarked dryly. "But — tell me of my obsequies! I have such a poor memory for trifles. Did they duly extol my poor merits and chant the latest Miserere? Have I perchance been canonized and endowed with a halo? A well-conditioned saint, as you know, my lord Strozzi, is an asset to a community and Messer San Marco is growing old!"

"Report hath it you were run down by a Tunisian in the Giudecca Canal."

"What matters it in which canal one drowns? In the end — Doge or bravo — it is sink or swim when the bottom drops out of the barge."

"Yet never did I hear of one choosing that particular spot for the purification of the body."

"So much for little fish venturing into big water," Zuan

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laughed mirthlessly. "Nevertheless — it should prove interesting to take a peep into a certain nameless grave, just to discover the usurper, whose soul at the final reckoning might take a sudden fancy to claim my body as its abode. It is ill living in a strange mansion. What say you, my lord Strozzi?"

"Venice is a terrible mistress. She has not been kind to you."

"Small chance that she will make amends. How fares the world of the lagunes?"

Strozzi gave a shrug.

"To-day as yesterday. To-morrow as to-day."

"Nothing stirring among the canals?"

"You have only to mingle with the nobles on the Broglio. What brings you back to Venice, where you are but a memory?"

Zuan regarded the speaker curiously.

"The privilege of the mask. It is so easy to prove an alibi. But," he continued after a pause, linking his arm in that of his companion and drawing him along, "tell me the news. Are sacks still being thrown nightly into the Orfano Canal? Do bottomless barges still creep out upon the night-wrapt lagunes? Tell me about yourself, my lord Strozzi. I have been told that you, too, have a trick of disappearing like a flimsy ghost. Where do they point your resting place?"

"Where have I not been?" Strozzi replied with an attempt at levity. "In and out of the lagunes, in Bosnia, Epirus, Sicily, in the Morea. But, we are discussing dangerous matters in this air," he stopped suddenly with an apprehensive gesture. "Who knows what lurks beneath a mask? Who knows whose ear is open and whose mouth is shut?"

"The gondolier's and the confessor's, perchance. Myself, in my double existence as man and ghost should hardly incur a risk. But we are flaunting the identical disguise!"

"By San Marco! A strange trick of fate. Yet Ephraim by the Rialto swore by all his long-bearded tribe, there was but one lilac domino in all Venice. An heirloom of the Calzi."

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"I have discovered no ownership certificate on mine," Zuan interposed, dryly.

"The long-bearded rascal is said to have other dealings with the Ten, aside from letting disguises."

"At best,— it is but a matter of establishing one's identity."

"A dangerous habit in Venice, where walls have ears and every keyhole is an eye."

"An owl is not more watchful and discreet."

"Put off that sardonic mask and tell me of yourself," Strozzi urged. "I can hardly believe the testimony of my eyes! What befell on that fateful night? What of the Tunisian?"

"It is a well-trained eye that can distinguish a Tunisian from a Saracen in a night so dark that sea and sky melt into one. Rather a well-instructed Charon too, and a barge from which the bottom drops at the convenient moment."

"Yet, you are living to tell the tale."

"Some fishermen from Istria chanced to be trailing large fish."

"And then?"

"A life of palm trees and oriental stench —"

"And we meet again in the City of the Sea!"

They had reached the dusky arcades of the ducal palace. Here too a great crowd in domino and mask came and went.

The deep shadows of the place, broken only by the gleaming spears and helmets of the halberdiers who kept watch near the inner court, seemed to invite greater privacy and security than the Piazza.

Perceiving that a few groups were lingering near, Strozzi motioned to his companion to follow him into the court.

"Let me once again put the question to you," he broke the silence. "What will you do here where your life is in hourly jeopardy?"

Zuan gave a shrug.

"Perchance I mean to retrieve my fortunes. Five years'

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roaming over the world is not likely to increase one's estate. Who administers justice in Venice?"

"Justice! A breath without a substance," Strozzi laughed harshly. "Take my word for it, my lord Castello, we shall see strange things happen, ere long, in Venice. But an hour ago I counted seven shooting stars."

"What does it argue?"

"More than I care to put into words."

Zuan turned abruptly to his companion.

"Who is the Leopard Prince?"

Strozzi gave a shrug.

"A myth! Perchance the phantom of the dead Inquisitor —"

"God save us from such a one," Zuan replied savagely.

"There are things in Venice which he who would eat his bread in peace had best forget."

Zuan gave a shrug.

"Who knows better than myself? Yet, memory is as fickle as woman — I hope your affairs prosper, my lord Strozzi."

"I fear Dame Fortune and I have not been on speaking terms for some time," Strozzi replied, non-committally. "Will you come with me to the Ridotto? Last night in my dream I saw a crocodile and a whisp of straw."

Zuan declined the invitation.

"I will not urge you," Strozzi said graciously, preparing to take his leave. "We shall meet again. Until then — farewell."

"May good fortune attend you, my lord Strozzi."

With a parting wave of the hand he crossed the Piazzetta and was gone.

Zuan continued seemingly aimlessly upon his way, when he was accosted by an ancient hag, flaunting her colored rags and tarnished clinking ornaments. She wore the odd head-dress of the Turcoman women of the Horde of the Black Sheep, and under it her wizened face looked very small and shrunken and almost lost.



"Suddenly she uttered a hoarse cry."



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Creeping up to Zuan she peered up at him sidewise like a bird. Then she put out one dry claw and touched his arm.

"Ah!" she said in a shrill, wheezing tone which was unlike any human voice he had ever heard. "You play with great folk, my lord. Seeking — and finding — who knows?"

Zuan shrank from her touch.

"I am seeking that which I would not find, old mother," he replied, hoping she would desist, for a curious crowd had quickly gathered about them.

The ancient hag raised her sandalled foot, the one over the other, like a beast, and took a single step towards the man who reluctantly extended his hand, over which she bent, scanning the palm very minutely.

Suddenly she uttered a hoarse cry and scuttled away for a pace, while the metal ornaments which she wore clinked and jangled about her, making weird music.

"You play with great folk, my lord," she shrilled again. "Seeking and finding — who knows?" Then she backed into the crowd, never taking her eyes off the man, who was far from comfortable upon discovering himself the target of the crowd's curiosity.

But a Venetian crowd does not linger round any one object, and a Calabrian donkey train that was lustily fighting its way through the congestion, quickly absorbed its attention.

A few moments later an agile form might have been seen bounding up the Giant Stairs. Without heeding the halberdiers, he approached the first of several orifices that opened into the wall of the palace, commonly called the Lions' Mouths.

Something he dropped into the grinning aperture, then, like a phantom, he glided down the broad flight of stairs and disappeared in the dusky arcades of the ducal palace.

CHAPTER IX

SECRET INTELLIGENCES



✓ **T**HE bronze giants on the Clock Tower of San Marco hammered out the hour and the bells of San Nicolo on the Lido sent their silvery chimes floating over the glittering waters of the lagunes, when Zuan Castello found himself once again caught up by the crowds and swept into the maelstrom of the carnival that surged and roared over the Piazza.

The throngs were increasing every moment.

All classes seemed bitten by the tarantula of mirth.

Mandarins from Cathay, slant-eyed, obese, steeped in the odor of sandal wood and musk, necromancers from the moon mountains of Ethiopia, fakirs from Bokkhara, Persian magi, rope dancers, astrologers in long, fantastic robes, exhibiting the signs of the zodiac and Dantesque hoods, quacks and wonder healers, spouting Bergamasc gibberish; these were the ever appearing, ever vanishing phantoms that met the bewildered gaze.

The women of the nobility in their white satin masks and black *zendaletti* surveyed the fantastic scene from the windows of the old Procuratié, or threaded the crowds on the arms of their gallants.

For a time Zuan seemed utterly oblivious of his surroundings. Even the shouts of the quack, who bawled through a tin horn the praise of his miraculous pills, fell upon unheeding ears.

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Seven days had passed since his arrival in Venice, when he had entered the deserted house by the lone canal, like a ghost, haunting the scenes of a former existence, and, seized by a terror too great for words, had sought safety in blind, unreasoning flight.

Once again he had been the mock of Fate.

Vainly trying to bring order into the confused chaos of his thoughts he continued upon his way.

Many an endearing word from rosy lips fell upon his ear, many an assignation was proposed with perfumed, fluttering breath. He heeded neither, provoking mirth or taunt.

Never had Venice, the glittering Queen of the Adriatic, seemed to him so fearsome as in this hour, when Folly and her retinue overflowed the Piazza, stormed the arcades, pierced the by-lanes of green water up to the *campielli* where the people danced in rings, and spread over the network of *calli* and canals as far as the Campi of San Stefano and San Fantin.

His chance meeting with Lucio Strozzi had enhanced rather than dispelled Zuan's apprehensions.

Strozzi had not been his old familiar self. His voice had lacked the frank and sympathetic note. His eyes had revealed, now a distant, now an anxious look, and, oftener than his wont, or than occasion seemed to justify, he had lapsed into silences. There had been small welcome in his greeting.

His countenance, too, had undergone a marked change since the olden days.

The shiftless eyes seemed to tell a tale of their own, enhanced by a certain restlessness, which he tried in vain to control.

A sudden thought flashed through Zuan's brain.

Crossing the Piazza and passing through the dimly lighted arch of the Clock Tower, he emerged in a narrow, crooked lane, composed chiefly of shops.

After continuing for some distance, he came to an emporium,

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the proprietor of which, sitting up for late custom, had not drawn his shutter. Over the door swayed an illegible sign, proclaiming the owner's name. The silver letters had been long effaced by the hand of time, but the shop window announced that here were for rent or sale mask costumes, dominos and other paraphernalia of the Carnival.

An odor of mice and rotten apples assailed the nostrils of the prospective patron, as he passed over the threshold. A lean, bleary-eyed Hebrew, clad in a dirty yellow kaftan, came shuffling out of a dingy back parlor and salaamed profusely.

Zuan briefly stated his wants.

Elkanah thereupon took heaven and earth to witness that his nobility had been guided to his humble abode by nothing short of divine inspiration.

For a couple of gold *bezants* Zuan exchanged his lilac domino for one of black silk.

Then he quitted the Hebrew's shop and retraced his steps towards the Piazza.

A strange sensation, as of being trailed by some invisible presence, haunted his senses, notwithstanding his change of attire.

Accelerating his gait he arrived in the Piazza and mingled anew with the crowds.

CHAPTER X

THE BRAVO



STRANGE restlessness had seized Strozzi the moment he had parted from the man who seemed to have verily arisen from the dead. Strange things had, ere now, happened in Venice. Things as strange were happening hourly. At best it was an unpleasant reminder of the fickleness of Fortune. And Fortune, being

proverbially a woman, could not be taken seriously in the city of masks and buffoons.

After reaching the quay he paused, as if struck by a sudden thought. He looked back after his double. The crowds had engulfed him.

With hurried gait he proceeded towards the Merceria, entered a costumer's shop, and exchanged his lilac domino and vizzor for one of black silk.

Then he hailed a gondola whose owner lay asleep on the poop and, unceremoniously rousing the slumbering Charon, gave the direction.

The gondolier plashed his oar and pushed the supple craft out into the basin of San Marco.

After a time they touched shore. Strozzi alighted and, having paid his fare, dismissed the boatman.

The region was deserted.

There were no chapels, no sculptured crosses, no effigies of

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saints, not one of those signs of devotion so frequent in the other parts of the city.

Everything had a strange and sullen aspect. Weird shadows furtively stalked the gloom. The high houses towered like so many Babels. All the maladies and forgotten leprosies of the Orient seemed to cling to the discolored walls. The dampness speckled them with spots not unlike gangrene.

Not a single line preserved the perpendicular. One story leaned inward, the other bulged out. Black casements gaped to admit the scanty light of sun or moon.

Ruined bridges, bending their arched backs, like men broken with the weight of years and almost allowing their spans to tumble into the water, connected these sombre squares, separated by stagnant canals with sleeping water, opaque and dull, like a Stygian marsh, or a pool of hell.

Some of the houses seemed utterly deserted of the living.

A landmark in the desolation, the tavern of the Black Dog, loomed in the distance, the rendezvous of all nondescripts who thrived, bat-like, after dusk, in the lagoon city, to end their career, sooner or later, in the slime and ooze of the Orfano Canal.

Strozzi knew his Venice thoroughly. He threaded his way through a maze of narrow lanes, along deserted canals, where none dared show himself after dusk who valued his life.

It was a quarter admirably suited to a man of Sordello's philanthropic calling. For it was to the abode of the dreaded bravo, Strozzi directed his steps.

A narrow, crooked lane behind the Clock Tower of San Onofrio, a street of crazy buildings that leaned across to one another, till, had they been carried a story higher, they must have met in a Gothic arch overhead, excluding the slender strip of sky, swallowed Strozzi as utterly as if his form had melted into the shadows.

At last he came to a house of so sinister an aspect that

even one who had lost his way beyond the hope of recovering his bearings would have hesitated, ere he knocked for admission.

Even as Strozzi took his first step towards the door, it swung inward, apparently of its own accord. In the dark frame, as if materialized out of the circumambient gloom, stood a cloaked figure, black from head to foot, the face concealed beneath a black vizor.

The bravo locked and barred the door as soon as the other had entered, then, igniting a copper lantern, preceded his belated visitor down a long passage, the lantern flinging its yellow disk of light along the grimy walls.

They came to a stout oaken door studded with nails, and through this into a bare chamber. There were dried rushes upon the floor and a wooden bench was set against the wall. Upon a table stood an oil lamp whose ruddy, quivering flame, ending in a pennon of black smoke, shed a very little light and emitted a great deal of smell.

The bravo extinguished the lantern and stood at attention.

Strozzi glanced suspiciously about the ill-favored abode.

Before addressing himself to Sordello, he opened the one door, which led from this chamber into the adjoining one, followed by the bravo's stony gaze.

Then he took his seat on the bench, Sordello standing within the radius of the lamp's feeble rays, awaiting his visitor's innuendo.

Strozzi shivered with the chill that pervaded the chamber.

"Your abode does not savor of the paradise to which you direct your victims — by the short and unfailing route. My messengers complain that you are oftener absent than your wont."

There was a fierce gleam in the bravo's eyes.

"Your messengers, my lord, take a chance like any other."

"May I inquire into your Highness' commands?" Strozzi turned to the speaker with a mock bow.

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"It is this," replied the bravo darkly, "that I am tired of being forced to guard this hovel day and night, and that I desire to breathe the air which is denied to none but malefactors."

"Do you indeed, Monseigneur?" replied Strozzi sardonically. "Well, I, too, should like now and then to take the air in the gardens along the Brenta, but am nevertheless obliged for reasons of state, to content myself with roaming about at night like a werwolf. However, if the life you are leading is not in keeping with the high estate to which you aspire, worthy Sordello, means may be found to elevate your station, even beyond your most daring aspirations. Many a one follows a worm and takes it for a star."

A disparaging gesture preceded the bravo's reply.

"There are times I cannot sleep, my lord. The last ordeal proved too harrowing even for one accustomed to peopling paradise. How much longer is this bondage to endure?"

Strozzi gave a shrug.

"It is a wise man who can answer all the questions of a fool. You cannot sleep? Well, let your deeds concern those who watch and know! There is work ahead. The hour requires a sure eye and a steady hand."

Sordello nodded wearily.

"The prudent man takes no chances," Strozzi continued. "You may have heard, worthy Sordello, though I fear your learning has been somewhat neglected, that the ichneumon destroys the crocodile in the egg?"

The bravo's demeanor changed to its usual stony calm.

"Ruffo might tell a tale thereof, my lord, were he still alive. I like not tourneying in company."

"Ruffo was a fool and deserved his fate! My presence here is proof of the importance of the task which is to be entrusted to your sagacity, worthy Sordello," Strozzi continued. "Therefore, take heed, lest you mistake sheep for mutton."

"My scent is unimpaired, my lord, notwithstanding the smell of blood that clings to my hands."

"Then mark well my words," Strozzi continued with a quick glance at the speaker. "There arrived here in Venice a stranger whose welfare is very dear to the state."

Sordello's face was stony beneath the mask.

"He is obsessed with the belief that he is the fisherman appointed from on high to rescue from the slime of the lagunes the ring which the Doge casts into the Sea on Ascension Day. While under the spell of this obsession he may even venture near the borders of the Orfano Canal, where it is death to cast a net. Do I make myself clear, worthy Sordello?"

"I know one who has the custody of some chambers, whither he might be led," the bravo replied darkly.

"And faith, I know of no man in all Venice that could be easier persuaded," Strozzi returned sardonically. "He ventures out alone at all hours, rambling into all sorts of blind lanes and alleys."

"In time the reward cannot fail him."

"It was not without an eye to these peculiarities that I remembered you, worthy Sordello. Men of the common sort are tempted below, in the meadows. To the great the devil appears on the mountain."

The bravo gave a nod.

"Therefore," Strozzi continued slowly, "I would have you trail him from afar. Let him suspect neither your presence nor your motive. Wear your monk's habit which you are accustomed to flaunt when the operation is to be swift and painless. It becomes you, and a barefoot Carmelite is a desirable companion, when the stones are slippery from excessive moisture. Besides — who knows but that, some day, it may be given to you to shrive a penitent?"

"I will follow him as his shadow, my lord!"

Strozzi threw a purse upon the table. Sordello did not touch the gold.

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"Meanwhile," Strozzi continued, "you will improve your learning by studying the places of interest the stranger visits. You will profit much by such erudition."

The bravo raised a gloved hand.

"By what sign shall I know him, my lord?"

A sardonic smile curved Strozzi's lips.

"Patience, good Sordello. You ride too swift a steed! There stands, in the Sacca della Misericordia, not far from Madonna dell' Orto, a deserted house within a deserted garden."

He paused as if to watch the effect of his words on the bravo.

Sordello gave a nod of understanding.

"A place no one will venture into after nightfall who values his life."

"Yet some are strangely careless of the gift, Sordello."

"There is some unseen intelligence abroad, my lord," the bravo said with a tremor. "All is not well since Mario Calvo met with his mishap. The Leopard Prince is everywhere and nowhere."

"The Leopard Prince!" Strozzi interposed savagely. "Perchance poor Ruffo could tell a tale were he still alive! I say to you, Sordello, if you would some day hang the key of a more pretentious mansion on your girdle than that of this abode where you lord it over dead men's bones — remember — whom you serve!"

"I shall remember!" the bravo replied darkly.

Strozzi's gaze seemed to pierce him through and through.

"Venice is a severe mistress. She knows how to reward and how to punish. See to it, Sordello, that you merit her favor and not her resentment. And let the thousand eyes of Argus be like those of a blind mole as compared with your vigilance. The Sacca della Misericordia! Watch and wait! The house within the garden — I must know who comes and goes. And now," he concluded, rising, and drawing his mantle about him, "proceed and light the way."

The bravo relighted the lantern and conducted his patron back through the musty corridor to the door by which he had entered.

With a silent wave of the hand Strozzi took his leave and retraced his steps through the gloomy lane to the nearest *traghetto*, where he gave a shrill whistle.

Out of the murk a gondola approached.

Entering the *felzé*, Strozzi gave the direction.

"To San Sepolcro!"

Like an ill-omened night bird the gondola sped over the turbid tide of the nocturnal canal and melted into the shadows of the night.

CHAPTER XI

THE LADY OF SAN SEPOLCRO



BETWEEN blind walls and dark doorways Strozzi's boat was gliding through phantom water lanes.

Here and there a light gleamed from a casement, plumbing the depths of the turbid channel with reflected rays. Some of the turnings were so narrow and angular that it seemed hazardous for the long and slender

gondola to pass in.

But the gondolier, with a warning "*Stalé*" that waked the silence, sent it skimming along without pause. At times other boatmen echoed the cry, their craft flitting past like phantoms and vanishing in the murk of the night.

At last they reached a dark cut, resembling the entrance into Tartarus. The gondola sped between the high walls like a frightened night bird.

It was a drab and dreary region. Darkness wove about them and silence, a slumbrous darkness full of mystery.

Quitting the *felzé* Strozzi stepped onto the landing, slippery and wet.

After instructing the gondolier to await his return he made his way to a door which he divined rather than saw. Taking a key from his pocket he groped for the lock. The door swung inward with a groan.

He stood in a gloomy, ill-smelling court.

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Some hundred feet away, dark against the darkness, rose the cloisters of San Sepolcro into the opaque gloom of the night.

An extensive complex of buildings, long deserted by those who had formerly occupied the long range of subterranean cells in a life of seclusion and worship, the cloisters had, in time, fallen into ill repute and were shunned as the abode of evil spirits.

An intricate network of corridors spread, like catacombs, for a considerable extent underground, connecting with some outlying ruins, where unholy rites had, in time, been performed.

A headless monk, haunting the galleries of San Sepolcro at certain seasons of the year, during periods of the full moon, had been seen by those who chanced to pass the cloisters, and even the boldest dreaded to trespass upon the haunted grounds after nightfall.

At first sight of the place, so huge, so grim, so silent, it is not surprising that even one boasting nerves of steel was seized with a certain panic.

It seemed as if nothing mortal could inhabit this abode.

The gloomy, frowning walls, the dark, narrow windows, suggested a thousand eerie fancies.

But of life, of human life, there was not the barest trace.

A few moments later Strozzi stood upon the threshold of the ghostly mansion. With the hilt of his dagger he gave three taps on the door.

It opened soundlessly, revealing a gulf of darkness.

A shadowy form, holding aloft a torch, evolved itself out of the murk, and bowed grotesquely, as it admitted the belated visitor.

Even in this uncertain illumination it would not have been difficult to fix the character of the guardian of San Sepolcro.

The hairy, pockmarked features, the inflamed eyelids, the fangs that gleamed through receding gums, the stealthy, limping gait—surely only murder thus announces its approach.

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Not in the whole category of human beings, daily avoided or nightly shunned, was there a shape resembling Pulcio, the dwarf, as he preceded Strozzi with his torch through dark halls and intricate passages, over winding stairways, bare and cold and dismal; through vast, gloomy chambers, the walls of which still displayed traces of their former splendor, being hung with tapestries of the most grotesque and startling devices.

The windows, pointed and narrow, with trellised panes, were at so great a height from the ground, that only faint glimpses of moonlight slanted on to the opposite walls, leaving the remote angles and recesses immersed in utter darkness.

At last they arrived in the refectory, apparently excavated in the rock, for walls and floor alike were of rough, unhewn granite.

The atmosphere was fetid, tainted with the pungent odor of decay. From a circular well in the center, of sufficient size to permit a man's body to enter, there appeared a faint glow.

Strozzi scanned his uncanny guide. He might have been a *phansigar* or some eastern thug, whose far-away home had been first visited by Marco Polo and whose tribe, in subsequent explorations, had furnished some welcome instruments of expediency and revenge to the nobles of Byzantium and Venice, who readily welcomed new methods of disposing of their enemies.

The dwarf made a grotesque bow.

"Shall I announce your magnificence?"

"My magnificence will announce itself," Strozzi replied curtly. "Has any one prowled about your tomb, Pulcio mio?"

A hideous grimace distorted the dwarf's features.

"Not since a certain explorer fell in the canal," he replied with a snarl.

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Strozzi's gaze rested on the strangler's hands, whose steely, uncommonly long fingers spoke more eloquently than words.

"I know not but that it is a more efficient weapon than Sordello's steel," he pondered, "which, now and then, sadly miscarries."

A sudden flash leaped into Strozzi's eyes, giving them, in the scant illumination, the semblance of glowing coals.

"Faliero was a fool," he muttered, "and Steno lives! I shall profit in his school!"

Taking Pulcio's torch, he entered a gloomy gallery which, at one time, separating the cells, led into unknown depths whither seldom a human foot lost itself.

Following the dark meandering passage to its termination, he came to a low, massive door, concealed in the grime of the blackened wall, and touched a spring.

It receded soundlessly, and Strozzi found himself in a chamber so entirely out of keeping with its surroundings that its incongruous appointments almost startled the intruder himself, for he paused on the threshold as he peered within.

The room was richly appointed. Piles of silken cushions formed splashes of gaudy color about the floor which was covered with a thick carpet. A bronze lamp was suspended from the ceiling, its light softened by a yellow, silken shade.

The walls were covered with tapestries of eastern design, and rich silken hangings, striped with thin plates of gold, divided the chamber which had no windows, from an adjoining one.

On the air hovered the fumes of some eastern incense smouldering in a quaint-shaped copper vessel.

Presently from the inner chamber there came the tall and slender form of a girl. As her gaze met the eyes of Strozzi, she paused with a sibilant intake of her breath. Her right arm, from which the sleeve of her silken garment had fallen back, caught the curtain as if for support, while her gaze rested upon the man with an expression that caused him to start.

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She wore a long, clinging gown of purple tissue, utterly unadorned, that clung like a veil to her exquisite form.

Strozzi advanced slowly toward the woman who was watching his every movement as the bird watches a snake.

"Gulnare!" he spoke, his eyes on the ravishing apparition. "By the Lion of San Marco, you have discovered a spell, that makes a bond-slave of all who come within the magic circle. Why stare you so? Is aught amiss?"

Abruptly pausing in his speech Strozzi glanced round the chamber, rather from a motive of perpetual distrust, than because he expected to find here some explanation of the woman's strange mood.

Gulnare's eyes narrowed. Between their long lashes lightnings seemed to leap on the intruder.

"And why should I welcome you," she spoke in a low voice that sent a strange thrill through his soul. "Because after days and nights of debauch you remember my existence in these dungeons?"

Strozzi listened — with a show of contrition he was far from feeling — to the reproach of the beautiful creature. Then, removing his mask, he boldly advanced towards her, seized her wrists and overcoming her struggle, bent back her head and kissed the scented, pouting lips.

Disregarding her resentment, he drew her beside him upon one of the low ottomans ranged alongside the wall.

"It is for this then you upbraid me — my enforced absence, because, the slave of circumstance and of a cruel, despotic power, I have seemingly neglected my bird of paradise?"

He tried to encircle her with his arms. She evaded him adroitly.

"Bird of paradise forsooth!" she cried with a wild laugh, "a bird that preens its feathers among the mouldering bones of the dead, among ghouls, vampires and the restless spirits of murdered men, while her lover sleeps in gilded chambers beneath silken canopies, attended by liveried lackeys, who

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obey his slightest whim! This very night I had it in mind to pay a visit to my lord's abode and to whisper a certain word into a certain ear."

Strozzi gave a start.

"Surely you are mad, Gulnare!"

"Am I mad indeed?" she flashed. "Have you reckoned with my soul, when you made of me the thing I am, bound to you by ties at which hell itself would pale?"

Strozzi squirmed. He knew Gulnare's temper was not to be quenched by subtle argument. It had to burn itself out in its own fires, ere he would supervene.

And so it chanced.

Her pent-up passion spent, Gulnare covered her face with her hands and sobbed convulsively.

"How unjust you are!" Strozzi broke the silence with a reproachful glance. "Deem you I saved your lover from the talons of the Secret Tribunal merely to have you pine away in these vaults, — did I not toil night and day to the end, that the reward may be yours in the days to come?"

Gulnare's hands had fallen from her face, but in her eyes glowed a fire that gave the lie to her assumed calm.

"How much longer must I remain the thing I am, luring those who darken your path to perdition?" she flashed, and the man's gaze dropped before those accusing eyes.

"The Three deal with facts alone," Strozzi replied inexorably. "Yet the end of your probation draws nigh!"

"Who has profited by this but you, who, for your own ends, made of me what I am?"

A disparaging gesture interrupted her harangue. Strozzi assumed an offended air.

"Can inemory so easily efface itself, Gulnare? A worse fate perchance than death awaited you at the hands of one who craved your beauty and would have stopped at nothing to remove the obstacle to his desire. It was only on the conditions known to you that your lover's life was saved."

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He paused and Gulnare stared with wide, burning eyes.

"Is he, indeed, still among the living?" she queried, her white fingers tightly interlaced. "May I not go to his dungeon to bring him solace from one who for the love of him became the thing she is?"

Strozzi pondered darkly:

"In time you may. You know our compact, the silent part you were to play in schemes whose whole extent you cannot guess even in your remotest dreams."

She gave a nod.

"He who met his death on yesternight should remind me of our pact, could I forget."

"No rose without its thorns," he replied sardonically, then continued:

"Are you ever mindful of my injunction, Gulnare, never under any pretext to address the bravo?"

Gulnare shuddered.

"It needed not your command my lord. Deem you I have so utterly lost all my woman's instincts in your service as to even breathe the same air as this monster?"

Strozzi nodded pensively.

"He, too, serves Venice — in his way."

"So does the executioner," she flashed.

"An indisputable necessity. A saint makes an ill hangman. We must take our tools where we find them. It is true Sordello is a bloodthirsty monster whose head should long have paid the forfeit of his crimes. For the nonce we require his steel. As for yourself, Gulnare, — everything in life has its price. But I have vowed to make you the instrument of your revenge and — mine."

She raised questioning eyes.

"Of my revenge?"

"The time draws nigh."

Gulnare regarded the man by her side in fixed silence, then she wearily shook her head.

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A dark smile played upon Strozzi's lips.

"You and I are slaves of that same dread power, whose dark behests we obey. It is not well to probe into reasons of state. Before the law your lover is a murderer. He slew his rival. Your youth and beauty touched my heart. You were coveted by one higher up, — I am not unfamiliar with the intrigues spun in a certain chamber. He whose very name to breathe is death desires the removal of certain malefactors whom the law cannot reach by reason of their rank. Their demise must appear due to other causes. The bravo works to the same end as yourself. Yet he is paid. Yours is a deed of mercy."

Strozzi watched her, as a snake watches the bird that is fluttering helplessly to its doom.

Gulnare covered her face with her hands, and shudder after shudder convulsed her body.

He waited to allow the meaning of his words burn into her brain.

"How I loathe the miscreant," she started at last. "May he receive his just deserts!"

Strozzi nodded absently.

"Doubt it not! In time he will!"

After a pause he continued:

"With the chief offender we have still to reckon. With you it lies to be revenged upon him — to make his life a burden and his death a curse. Have you the will, Gulnare? For I need not question your courage."

He paused, regarding her narrowly.

"How am I to accomplish this thing?" she queried tremulously.

"It will require all your cunning, all your wit. But — consider the reward!"

A strange fire gleamed in the girl's eyes.

"Who is he? Take me to him!"

A smile of exultation gleamed in Strozzi's eyes.

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"Not even a flimsy ghost can enter where he dwells."

"Does he go abroad — alone — unattended?"

"If it were this manner of end I planned for him — Venice abounds in bravi. Such a death means nothing, to such a man. A stab — and it is over. To make life a living death for him, to haunt him with all the terrors of the grave, yet interminably make him spin out his agony — for this task have I chosen you."

"My brain reels. I do not understand."

A baneful light gleamed in Strozzi's eyes.

"You will, Gulnare, in time. And now forget the past, live in the hour."

Obedient to his mute entreaty, she arose, and the heavy folds of the silken curtain that screened the adjoining chamber dropped behind their retreating forms.

CHAPTER XII

A NIGHT IN THE PAST



AFTER having changed his attire, Zuan continued for a time aimlessly upon his way.

Five years had passed since a bolt from the clear azure had shattered his life, his happiness, his career.

A scion of the old and noble house of the dukes of Lepanto, whose shadowy reign had come to a close under Venetian dominion, Zuan, relinquishing the sinking fortunes of his house had absolved his studies at Padua, then entered the service of the Venetian state.

The Three were not slow in recognizing his ability and he was entrusted with secret missions to Ragusa, the capital of Dalmatia, where he became a potent factor in counteracting the intrigues of the Ban of Bosnia, whose lustful eye coveted Dalmatia and her outlying isles, Veglia, Cherso, Lucin Grande, and Arbé, cherished above all his possessions by the Doge.

There he met Fulvia, of the great Arbesian house of the Zudeneghi.

They loved at first sight.

All his hopes seemed realized, when Fulvia Zudeneghi crowned his love with the gift of her hand.

After months of unalloyed happiness in their chosen Buen Retiro in the Sacca della Misericordia, Zuan received a summons to depart at once for Ragusa, where the intrigues of the Ban threatened to undermine Dalmatian loyalty.

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How vividly those fateful days stood out in his memory, the hour of parting — the first, since their happy union. He stifled the secret voice of misgiving that seemed to warn him. He tried to reassure himself. A fortnight at most they would be parted. The galley that carried him to Dalmatia would return him to the arms of Fulvia.

He recalled the strange dread in her eyes, her pallor, in the hour of parting. The same premonition of evil was haunting his own pillow. He made light of her fears, but in his heart he wished he had been spared the summons.

After a brief and uneventful journey he arrived at Ragusa. But the contentions among the ruling factions in Venice, in this age of conspiracies the bane of the aristocratic republic, and the secret intrigues of the Ban of Bosnia, whose boasted mistress and secret emissary, the Magyar Princess Yaga, spread her nets in the very heart of Ragusa, delayed the departure of the Venetian envoy and placed unforeseen obstacles in his path.

The Princess Yaga, in whose toils he had languished in the days ere he had met and loved Fulvia Zudeneghi, showed a sudden disposition to spurn her barbaric admirer and to shower her favors anew on the Venetian envoy.

Zuan dreaded, above all, the sinuous charms of the beautiful Magyar, whose fierceness, passion and unscrupulousness would stop at nothing to attain her ends; as had been amply demonstrated by her terrific encounter with Natalie Volutich, the beautiful and spirited daughter of the Ragusan senator, in which the two, equally matched and fired by deadly hatred and jealousy, had almost destroyed each other.

She even declared her intention of accompanying Zuan to Venice.

At last the secret charts were delivered into his hands and, after an absence of three weeks, Zuan, mad with anxiety over the absence of tidings from Fulvia, landed in Venice.

The hour was late and, deeming it inexpedient to arouse

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the Grandé, he hailed a gondola, urging the boatman to his utmost speed. He was counting the moments on the string of time.

It was the fourth hour of the night when the gondola dashed up to his Buen Retiro. Bounding up the water-stairs, he sped through the silent garden.

The house was in darkness. Silence was everywhere. Doubtlessly Fulvia and the inmates had retired.

He was about to raise the bronze knocker, when an unseen hand seemed to guide his own to the knob. He gave a twist and a start. The door was unlocked. The icy hand of death seemed to clutch at his heart.

The corridor gaped dark and silent as the grave. He called. There came no response.

Lighting a torch he rushed from chamber to chamber. Not a trace of Fulvia; not a trace of the servants. Were they attending some festa? Venice abounded in pageants.

Returning to the threshold, he waited.

Hour dragged upon hour. The sky turned grey behind the Dolomites, and still he was glued to the spot, staring blindly into the mists that began to settle over the waters, like a shroud.

When the first light-shafts pierced the grey veils of dawn, Zuan, more dead than alive, hailed a gondola and gave the direction. He scarcely noted the shy glances of his Charon as, with one comprehensive look, the latter took in his ashen, dishevelled countenance, which he doubtlessly attributed to a cause as remote as possible from the true one.

Arrived at the prefecture, Zuan staggered into the guard room.

After waiting what seemed aeons to his tortured soul, the Chief of the Signori di Notte made his appearance. To his wild and incoherent tale he listened as to the ravings of a madman.

The *sandolo* of the water police proceeded at once to the Sacca della Misericordia.

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The sum of their investigation confirmed Zuan's account. Not a niche was left unsearched by the *sbirri*. Yet of Fulvia they found not a trace.

Mad with doubt, terror, despair, Zuan reentered the *sandolo*. They passed the Piazzetta. The boat turned into the canal between the palace and the prisons.

It landed at the water gate near the spot now spanned by the Bridge of Sighs.

Here Zuan was met by an officer of the Secret Tribunal, who commanded him to follow. After a time he found himself in a chamber all hung with black, from the black carpet on the floor to the black tapestries on the walls.

He stood in the presence of the Secret Tribunal.

The Inquisitors were masked and so seated that their very persons seemed to melt into the sombre gloom of the chamber.

He who served as spokesman, the secretary of the Three, after having absolved the usual formalities of inquiry, questioned Zuan as to why he had failed to wait upon the Grandé, to deliver into his hands the charts of the Dalmatian fortresses.

Pleading the late hour and the surprise that awaited him upon arriving at his abode, Zuan's hands fumbled in his doublet, only to be withdrawn, as if his fingers had encountered a snake therein.

The secretary extended his hand to receive the charts.

Dazed, unable to formulate a coherent thought, Zuan stammered some inarticulate response. The charts were not there. He requested permission to return to the house in the Sacca della Misericordia. Doubtlessly he had dropped them there during the night.

A frozen silence, fraught with unthinkable possibilities, was succeeded by a whispered consultation. Zuan was curtly informed that his request could not be granted. An officer of the Three was despatched in his stead. After an hour that seemed interminable, the messenger returned, empty-handed.

Zuan began to rave. Madness had seized him with her

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cruel talons. He demanded of them his wife. He accused them of having conspired against his honor, his life. He inveighed against them, tyrants, and oppressors, serving the state but for their own mean and selfish ends.

The masked Inquisitor and his associates listened like so many statues to the ravings of the unfortunate.

At last he collapsed, falling senseless on the floor of the chamber. When he regained consciousness he found himself under the leaden roofs, enveloped by Stygian darkness.

How long he lingered there, in solitary confinement, only relieved by the advent and departure of the gaoler who brought his meagre fare, he knew not. He had ceased to count the hours and days.

To his questions, his threats, his ravings, silence was the sole response.

At last the day came when they led him forth.

His guards conducted him, a human wreck, pale, tottering, more dead than alive, through interminable corridors and galleries, up and down meandering flights of stairs, until he had finally lost all sense of direction.

Once again he stood in the chamber of the Inquisitors, accused of having betrayed the secrets of the Venetian state, having delivered the charts of the Dalmatian fortresses to a secret emissary of the Ban of Bosnia.

Crushed by the stupendousness of the accusation, coming as it did on the heels of the terrible mystery that surrounded the disappearance of his wife, Zuan was condemned to death, without a chance to prove his innocence.

As the sentence was about to be pronounced, his ravings returned, and his guards with difficulty restrained him from strangling the secretary, as he referred to him as a traitor to the Venetian state.

Nevertheless his ravings seemed to have their own effect upon the Three.

Suspending sentence to more closely examine the evidence,

Zuan was returned to his prison, a broken man, who cared no longer what fate held in store for him.

Weeks passed. His very existence seemed to have been forgotten, when, one day, they led him forth again from his dungeon, again he stood in the presence of the Three.

The secretary who acted as spokesman was another than he who had so nearly paid the forfeit of his life.

Amidst a silence so tense that he could hear the beating of his own heart, Zuan was informed that the Secret Tribunal, in view of the strange circumstances surrounding the loss of the charts, desiring to exercise its prerogative of mercy, had changed the sentence of death to banishment for life. A galley, anchored in the Giudecca Canal, was to convey him to his unknown goal.

Like an automaton Zuan followed the guards, who led him to the water gate of the palace, where a barge lay in waiting, which he was to enter.

The night was dark. Not a star was in the sky.

The masked gondolier headed slowly for the basin of San Marco.

Dark clouds, driven by a rising wind, seemed to blot out the very confines of creation. Only the dim lights in the distance gave hint of the shores of the Giudecca.

The barge imperceptibly increased its speed.

Once, he thought, the eyes of the masked boatman were ominously directed upon him through the slits of his mask.

Suddenly there was a terrific impact. He felt himself sinking in the Stygian tide.

A large, dark object swished past.

Barge and boatman vanished in the night.

CHAPTER XIII

AN UNCANNY COMPANION



VERY fibre of his being strung taut, Zuan pursued his way, resolved to tear the veil from the hidden face of the past, to discover the author of his misfortunes, no matter how exalted, if indeed he still was of the living.

It was growing late.

The maskers were slowly dispersing; fewer arrivals were to

be noted.

Hailing a gondola Zuan gave the direction and entered the boat, but did not take his seat in the pavilion.

The gondolier plashed his oar and headed for the Grand Canal.

Leaning one arm on top of the canopy, Zuan remained for some time the prey of his own thoughts, gazing out upon the moonlit lagoon.

On his right arose the phantomesque wonder of the ducal palace. Beneath thousands of colored lanterns, in a scintillating haze, moved a motley throng in domino and mask.

On his left, the cloisters of San Giorgio Maggiore rose into the pellucid ether from the smooth and glittering mirror of the sea, unruffled by so much as a wavelet, save where a passing gondola shattered the reflected images in its course.

They had reached the mouth of the Grand Canal, still enlivened by belated pleasure boats.

The gondola continued its soundless course with the sprite-

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like movement peculiar to its kind. The gondolier, poised on the arched deck, pushed his oar with accustomed readiness and skill, causing the supple craft now to veer to the right, now to the left, as it glided among and extricated itself from the multitude of shipping which it passed upon its way.

Palace after palace had been left behind.

Utter peace and quiet reigned upon the waterways, though festive crowds still thronged the centre of Venetian life and gayety, the Piazza, the Piazzetta and the Mole.

Zuan was about to take his seat in the *felzé* when he gave a start as if he had, inadvertently, seen an adder in his path.

The *felzé* held an occupant, whose eyes, through the slits of his mask, were fixed upon him with an expression that made his blood run cold. Huddled in his seat he stared sullenly at the intruder, without deeming it worth while either to explain his own presence or to offer an apology, and so sinister was his aspect that Zuan's hand unconsciously gripped the hilt of his poniard. The gondolier, apparently innocent, continued to row, as if nothing were amiss.

For a moment Zuan's resentment over the supposed treachery of the boatman threatened to master his discretion and his first impulse was to throw the intruder into the canal.

For a time the two regarded each other warily. Zuan doubted not but the fellow was armed and, in the scuffle, the gondola would be upset. On the other hand, it was hardly to be expected that he would yield to persuasion, and the gondolier, doubtlessly informed of his presence, was perchance his confederate.

These considerations flashed with lightning swiftness through Zuan's brain and inspired the one course of action that would compel the fellow to show his hand, revealing, at the same time, whether or not the gondolier was his accomplice.

The distance from his goal was to be reckoned with and there was no passing craft which he might hail.

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Taking his cue from the fellow's sullen demeanour and resolved to leave no doubt in his mind regarding his own intentions, Zuan turned to the occupant of the *felzé*.

"What is your business here, fellow?" he addressed the sinister shape, whose gaze never relinquished his own. "This gondola is mine for this trip. Ho, gondolier!"

The latter, instead of heeding the summons, drove his frail craft through the water at redoubled speed.

He in the *felzé*, however, replied in the rude and broken accents of the Morlac brigand peasants of Epirus, that he craved his lordship's pardon, but that his own errand brooked no delay and even now he was almost at the goal of his journey.

"What is your goal?" demanded Zuan, whose suspicions regarding the gondolier were now confirmed, taking mental note of the ruffian's determined manner which belied his semblance of humility.

"San Sepolcro," replied the sullen shape, peering through the curtains of the *felzé*. "Ho, Jacopo!"

Zuan gave a start.

All the memories of his first night in Venice, after an absence of years, flooded back upon him, his mysterious acquaintance, the hidden chamber, Gulnare's strange words and stranger warning.

Zuan noted with amazement that the gondolier heeded the other's call and the gondola dashed up to the landing at a speed that almost precipitated him into the water, as it came to a sudden stop.

As the sinister shape crept from the pavilion, a slight shuffling of the hand under his cloak confirmed Zuan's suspicions. The sheathing of a weapon would have produced a similar sound.

After quitting the gondola the muffled shape turned down a narrow lane and was quickly lost to sight.

Without heeding Zuan's indignant protests or even vouchsafing him a glance, Jacopo pushed his craft into midstream

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and caused the gondola to fly over the waters like an arrow.

Now, the dark occupant of the *felzê* having taken his departure, Zuan's wrath vented itself on the boatman. The latter, ignoring his patron's harangue, continued 'to ply his oar, and Zuan vowed a heavy reckoning when they should have reached their goal.

The region they had entered was silent as the grave. The moon had risen so high that her light, here and there, fell slanting between the dark range of walls, touching the surface of the water, to which it imparted a quivering, oily brightness, while the distant domes and towers dreamed beneath her light in grand and solemn repose. Occasionally the front of a palace received the moon's full rays on its heavy cornices and fantastic pillars, the gloomy aspect of the lightless interior being brought out in striking contrast with the fantastic beauty of the sculptured façades.

They were approaching the quarter of Rialto.

Now only the gondolier slackened his speed and turned to his patron.

"Pardon, my lord," he said in a low, trembling voice. "I dared not speak, nor make sign, while the eyes of the miscreant were upon us. Know you the quality of him who alighted at San Sepolcro?"

Zuan's anger began to melt before the pleading voice of the boatman. He scrutinized him more closely and saw he was old and the hair beneath the dirty, faded Montero cap was white. Nor did the features, of the hues of dirty parchment, reveal the characteristics of a rogue.

"How should I?" he replied nevertheless with a show of asperity. "The churl wore a vizor, though the eyes that gleamed through the slits were not those of a saint. Why did you not tell me at once that your gondola contained the cut-throat?"

Old Jacopo shrugged.

"I knew not then, my lord. The villain doubtlessly crept

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into the *felzé* while I lay asleep on the poop. I had been rowing since the early hours of morning and my strength is not what it used to be. So, when night came, I drifted towards the Riva, where custom is slack. After I pushed the boat out into midstream, while your lordship was looking towards the shore, Sordello peered through the curtains of the *felzé* and made a sign. One word of warning, and neither your lordship nor I would be here to tell the tale."

A shudder passed through Zuan's frame.

"Whom does he serve?"

"Surely, your lordship is a stranger in Venice?"

"Your guess is right, old man."

Jacopo shivered despite the warmth of the night.

"Whenever a poniarded corpse is taken from the water, — save in the Orfano Canal where it is death to cast a net — it is the unseen hand. This is the third time he has compelled me to do his bidding. I thought it was yourself, my lord, who was marked, yet I dared not whisper a warning."

"Has he any claim upon you, old man?" Zuan queried, puzzled, yet moved to pity by the old boatman's tale.

"Who knows?" Jacopo stammered with a pathetic shrug.

"Night covers many a mystery and crime."

The ensuing silence was suddenly broken by a cry of distress.

It was repeated in quick succession.

Zuan, with a start, turned to the boatman.

"There is murder abroad. Hear you, old man?"

Old Jacopo's trained ear had caught the appeal.

"*Sancta Maria ora pro nobis!*" he muttered, as the gondola shivered under the stroke of his oar.

The Grand Canal, at this point, makes an almost abrupt turn, sinking down into a wide, shadowy lane, between dark, towering palaces, partly untouched by the rays of the higher risen moon.

In the hazy distance the shadowy Rialto threw its colossal

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curve slowly forth from behind the palace of the Camerlenghi.

It required no importuning on Zuan's part to speed the gondolier to the scene of the probable disaster.

The cry of distress was succeeded almost immediately by the rush and foam of the water, as it piled before the peak of Jacopo's gondola.

Now a shadowy head, two shadowy arms rose, some fifty feet ahead out of the water.

Energy and skill were in every stroke and the gondola came down upon the dark spot like a swallow touching the water with its wing.

"Help! Help! I fail —"

The cry came faintly and dismally out of the hazy murk.

Zuan was urging the gondolier to a supreme effort. At each stroke the supple craft seemed to rise bodily out of the water. Now the beak of the gondola almost touched the head of the drowning man. The swish of the water stifled the appeal.

An arm was still visible above water.

A backward stroke that caused the ashen blade to bend like a reed, and the boat quivered, motionless, and stopped.

A third time the arm appeared above the surface, then it sank and came up no more.

Zuan gave an outcry of dismay.

"The lilac domino!"

"Another," muttered the boatman, making the sign of the cross and pushing his boat into mid-stream.

For a moment or two Zuan stared frozen with horror at the spot where the body had sunk out of sight.

There were but two lilac dominos in Venice.

Unless this was Strozzi — which he was loath to believe — another had gone to a doom prepared for himself!

Just then a shadowy form, muffled and cloaked, his head covered by a Montero cap, came out of a dismal lane, almost opposite the scene of the disaster, lurked for a moment in the shadows of the tall palaces and slunk away.

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"Another?" Zuan, whose watchful ear had surprised the sinister comment of his Charon, turned to the latter. "You speak of drowning men as if murder were your trade, old man."

Old Jacopo gave a sigh.

"When you have plied the oar upon the lagunes as long as I have, my lord," he replied in sorrowful tones, "you will cease to think or to wonder. Besides," he added, "poverty like mine cannot meet with more contempt even for being seen in his company."

An odor of seaweed and floating substances long past their prime informed Zuan that the gondola had touched at the slimy and discolored steps that led up to the tavern he had chosen for the night, nor was this first impression bettered by the cheer of the house that seemed a fit abiding place for human derelicts who had cause to shun the light of day.

Zuan dismissed his Charon with the warning to beware of bravi and similar gentry, then he climbed the crooked stairs leading to the chamber, assigned to him by the host of the tavern.

The hour of midnight had long pealed from the churches and convents in Venice, and still sleep would not come to Zuan's eyes.

The events of the day passed in review before him, the one more strange, more mysterious than the other, yet without affording one gleam of light in the gloom that enshrouded him.

Zuan had not exaggerated in his own mind the difficulties that would beset his path, the obstacles that would pile in the way of his pilgrimage to the shrines of dead honor and dead Love!

Like hammer strokes of destiny event had crashed upon event, since his arrival. /

Who was the master of the show, whose beck these dark presences obeyed?



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In the arms of Morpheus he temporarily forgot the perils that beset him, but throughout the silent watches of the night he was conscious of a shadowy presence that was watching outside his chamber door and would not be denied.

CHAPTER XIV

THE SPELL OF THE JASMIN



THE day was dying.

The furnace of the West had smouldered into pale ashes in the plains of Padua.

Fleecy shoals of cloud floated across the sky, mournful pageants of sunset, hanging roses and flakes of crimson fire over the expanse of heaven's pavilion.

The evening seemed charged with inexplicable melancholy, as if some sinister portent were pervading all nature.

The lagunes were asleep, heaving in long undulations beneath the immense dome of the sky.

Now the vapours of the plains of Lombardy were hiding the sun's disk. Behind San Pietro in Castello a dark cloud canopy had arisen. A storm was approaching from the Euganean Hills.

It was near the hour of dusk when a solitary gondola discharged its lone inmate at the water-stairs of the deserted house in the Sacca della Misericordia, and departed.

Zuan slowly ascended the water-stairs, entered the deserted garden, crossed the laurel arbor in the ever deepening dusk, illumined by the faint flickerings of distant lightnings, and paused before the low, iron-studded door.

The first wave of fear was upon him and it was some time ere he could fit the key in the lock. A prey to sinister fore-

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bodings he stood upon the threshold. Yet it was not fear of earthly things.

It was as if the whole world were listening to the grating of the key in the lock, to the groan of the door as it swung slowly inward, revealing a yawning gulf of darkness beyond.

Zuan passed quickly within, and behind him the door fell into the lock with a crash that echoed prodigiously through halls and corridors.

Lighting a copper lantern, and raising it aloft, he surveyed the interior.

It was dreary enough, for there is nothing more desolate in all the abodes of men than an empty house, dimly lighted, silent, and tenanted with the memories of some evil deed.

Again Zuan stood in the hall as on that eventful night of his return. A long, dark passage gaped before him. The broad stairs rose in a dusky sweep before his vision, draped everywhere in shadows, save for a single space halfway up, where the lightnings flickered through the oriel window upon the pale face of the woman with the wide, sad eyes. This window shed a faint radiance above and below it, imparting to the nearest objects a dim, ghostly outline, infinitely more suggestive than utter darkness. It seemed to paint faces on the surrounding gloom and, as Zuan peered into the well of darkness above, and thought of the silent and desolate chambers, he almost wished for the society of one to share his vigil. Realizing that these thoughts were dangerous, he thrust them from him and summoned all his energies for concentration on the present.

Everything, it seemed to him, appeared to resent his intrusion, seemed to watch him, as it were, with veiled eyes. Whispers seemed to follow, shadows to flit about him. Something seemed ever at his elbow, watching, waiting, invisible, intangible. A malignant presence seemed to rise up, warning the intruder to desist, and with every moment the strain upon his nerves intensified.

SPELL OF THE JASMIN 99

Out of the gloomy reception room he passed through large folding doors into a sort of library, wrapt in silence and shadows, darkness and dust.

The echoes of his steps waked eerie creakings and whisperings, else everything was silent as the grave.

Raising his lantern he continued his perambulation, passing from room to room like some errant spirit, lighting up dark and remote recesses, as if he hoped to find there that which he sought. Here and there he touched a familiar object, and the sensation he had experienced on the first night began slowly to master him again. The atmosphere seemed charged with terror. By a sort of subconscious preparation, coupled with a strong determination to see the thing through, he kept himself in hand, putting away all regrets and turning the key upon them.

Below, the silent, lugubrious canal stretched away, dark and lonely, its oily surface melting into the basaltic gloom of the skies. Distant thunder growled. Eerie gusts of wind came wandering fitfully through the garden, rattled at the closed windows, shook the trees and bushes into shuddering anxiety.

Every detail Zuan examined on his round, as if thereby he hoped to reach the core of the mystery. But the mystery grew deeper and the icy hand of fear began to lay its paralyzing touch upon him. He dared not set foot in the chamber he had visited before.

Entering a room he had formerly occupied as his own, he lighted a taper and arranged to make himself comfortable for the night.

It was a high vaulted chamber fitted up in the massive Lombardo-Gothic style. The furniture was of heavy black walnut. Along the tapestried walls whose designs had been well-nigh obliterated by dust and dampness, were ranged amphoræ, ceramics, gold and silver vessels, medals, oriental weapons and statuettes. A bronze lamp of Turkish design was suspended from the ceiling. Lanterns adorned with

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wreathed columns and closed with mirrors produced on the walls the effect of a chiaroscuro.

In an alcove, dusky, remote, beneath a silken canopy, supported by gilded caryatides, loomed, dimly visible, a bed.

It had been unoccupied for years. There he would spend the night.

Zuan's thoughts, from the weary present, lost themselves in the dim, distant past. Vainly he strained to reach the core to the mystery, the mystery that had wrecked his life.

Through his brooding he seemed to hear the dying, drowsy footfall of the tired day, monotonously ebbing away in the phantom veils of dusk. The world of men dwindled and grew dim, while Time, the snake, devoured himself, and the ghostly sands of the hourglass ran on and ever on.

Darkness shuddered down.

The world was reeling into silence. Still the memories of the past pierced with troubled glimmers his waking dream.

After eternities he had returned, a ghost into a world of ghosts.

He had stepped over the threshold of the gloom.

Outside, the canals were ablaze with lights.

Muted lutes sang of nocturnal sins.

A flash of lightning rent the sky. A peal of thunder crashed overhead. By degrees he began to sink down from the bright waves of life to twilight dunes, where despair beckons with dry, bony hands.

Had he loved a phantom woman, roaming the world forever, after hearing an echo of marvelous laughter?

Dust is most indiscreet. Grey ghosts move in the candlelight.

Had she betrayed him?

His brain reeled with a multitude of incoherent thoughts and questionings.

More and more he felt the utter paralysis of his faculties, the lack of courage to grapple with the shadowy fancies that crowded upon him.

SPELL OF THE JASMIN 101

A cloud, dense, dismal, limitless, seemed to obscure past and future alike.

The intolerable weight of anxiety grew upon him.

What sorcery could bring back the long lost past?

The dusky draperies were tortured into motion by a lost breath of the night wind that strayed among the hangings.

The torch flickered uneasily.

An irrepressible tremor passed through his frame.

About the whole house hung an atmosphere peculiar to itself, an atmosphere which had no affinity with the pure air of heaven, but seemed to reek up from some silent, stagnant pool of hell, mystic, leaden-hued.

The unsteady candlelight rendered sufficiently distinct the more prominent objects about him. The eye, however, struggled in vain to reach the remoter angles of the chamber, or the recesses of the vaulted and fretted ceiling.

One by one the clocks of Venice pealed the midnight hour, and, as their echoes died away, the deep silence of the night sank once more upon the shuddering world.

Only the boom of the sea, far away, filled the air with hollow murmurs.

Inside the house the silence became awful, awful he thought, because every moment it might be broken by sounds portending terror.

Again he could not rid himself of the sensation that movement was going on about him. It was like the sounds of footsteps moving stealthily along the passages, in and out the rooms, behind the walls.

Inaction was no longer possible. Every moment he was growing less and less master of himself.

Whatever it was, he would face it, boldly, unflinchingly.

Taking up the copper lantern he passed out of the chamber, upon the dark landing, avoiding with his eyes the black well of darkness below.

Then he began to mount the stairs, a shadow among shadows,

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in the dim circle of light, dispensed by the lantern that trembled in his fingers. He shivered. It seemed unnaturally cold.

And always was with him the dread of some malignant presence.

Mechanically, like an automaton that has run its course, he returned to the chamber, which he had left. Yet he dared not seek his couch and, seated in the high-backed chair, he fell into a fitful, uneasy slumber, from which he waked now and then with a start, as if some one were in the chamber.

The candles had burnt low, and, gutting the sconces, were slowly extinguished.

He was alone in the darkness.

At one time he had the sensation as if some one were spying upon him from the wall, above the chair.

Truly these were no mortal shapes that invisibly stalked the corridors. He was face to face with something, before which even his courage quailed and turned to water. What mortal might cope with the denizens of the unknown?

At last he walked towards the bed, drew aside the curtains and dropped on to the silken covers. His lids drooped and he fell into a fitful, uneasy slumber, in which strange dream phantoms haunted his pillow.

It seemed to him the ghostly moonlight was shining in at the windows between the crimson hangings, revealing every article of furniture in the chamber.

As he peered out from between the curtains he saw something else.

From behind the carved chair which he had occupied a short hour ago, the shadowy form of a woman evolved itself. A pungent scent of jasmin was wafted to his nostrils and his gaze met the gaze of two eyes that held his own as with a magic spell.

The two eyes began to move towards him through the gloom. Now they were above him.

The face was the face of Fulvia!

SPELL OF THE JASMIN 103

He tried to call to her. Terror paralyzed his tongue.

Now she beckoned to him.

He rose and, lighting a torch, blindly followed.

The phantom shape preceding him they quitted the chamber and entered a long, dusky corridor. Descending a winding flight of stairs they arrived at a door before which she paused.

He had never seen this door before.

For a moment he saw her standing, faintly outlined against the gloom.

When he looked again she seemed to have passed through the solid wall.

He raised the torch and gave a start.

A shred of purplish gossamer web, fluttering from a nail in an eerie gust of wind that shuddered down the corridor, attracted his eye.

With trembling fingers he detached it.

As he touched the soft silken texture, Zuan opened his eyes.

He stood in a vaulted passage. In his right hand he held a torch. His left crushed a purplish shred of gossamer web.

Was he awake? Was he dreaming? Was he going mad?

A choked outcry came from his lips as his gaze was glued to the filmy shred that held the mystery of life and death.

It was torn from a *zendaletto*, such as the women wear on the isle of Zanthé, a gift from him to Fulvia in the olden days.

Whither did this strange door lead?

The night wove on its mystery.

END OF BOOK THE FIRST





BOOK THE SECOND



CHAPTER I

CRIMSON BILLOWS



GLITTERING concourse was sweeping through the imposing portals into the Hall of the Ambassadors in the ducal palace, diffusing an air of splendor and magnificence seldom witnessed even within these stately precincts.

Matters of grave import awaited the ears of those who guided the destinies of the Republic. Notwithstanding the warmth of the westering sun, they seemed to be conscious of a chill and piercing wind. Never had Venice felt that chill wind before.

One alone knew its portent, one who had the courage to look steadily into the face of the future, in which he discovered not a ray of hope; Giovanni Gradenigo, the Doge, the man who despite his years and infirmities seemed little inclined to relax one jot of the shadowy power vested in him by those who had placed him on his shadowy throne.

Though he realized that war encompassed Venice on every side, that the enemy stood at her very doors, ready to invade the territories of the Republic, he was grimly resolved to defy the pretensions of Hungary and Bosnia alike.

It was known that Genoa was but waiting the opportunity to make common cause with the enemy of the Republic and there were rumors, sinister and persistent, that the Ban of

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Bosnia would push his own unnatural claims to Dalmatia as soon as he found Venice embroiled in a struggle that would tax to the utmost her resources and her strength.

While the battle of Trapani, fought almost one hundred years ago, when the Venetians inflicted crushing defeat on the Genoese who lost the whole of their fleet, was still in the minds of men, the Republic could hardly hope to successfully cope with three adversaries as powerful as those who menaced her existence. To make matters worse her councils were divided. The conspiracy of Marino Faliero had shaken the Venetian state to its very foundations, and it was known that its ramifications extended to the very confines of the Republic.

Lucio Strozzi championed a party whose sympathies were as remote as possible from the policy of the Doge, and he counted on the support of many who resented sacrificing the remunerative trade with the East by bearding a coalition that would encircle Venice and leave them stranded on the shores of poverty.

It was the hour of high noon. The great hall was filled with a magnificently arrayed throng of senators, councillors and the scions of the Venetian nobility.

At the upper end, under a magnificent canopy with the emblem of the Lion of San Marco, stood the throne seat of the Prince of Venice, surpassing in the splendor of its gilt and precious stones even the fabled throne of the Emperor of the East.

The escutcheons of the Loredan, Morosini, Balbi, Grimani, Mocenigo, Pisani, Vendramin, Cavalli, Cornaro, Foscari, Gabia, Mengaldi and many others flashed in the double illumination of the sun and the tall, perfumed tapers that rose from their gilded sconces.

The nobles conversed, singly or in groups, but to the chance onlooker it became apparent that an air of dread and apprehension hovered over that splendid assembly that set the air alight with its magnificence and pomp.

An unseen hand was striking in the dark at the very roots of the Republic's life.

Giacomo Pisani, the heir of the great house whose name he bore, had, but a few nights ago, gasped out his young life under the blows of hired assassins. Ere Venice had recovered from her stupor, a scion of the Balbi had been taken from the slime and ooze of the Dead Lagune. Fabio Mastelli had shared the same fate and the efforts of the Signori di Notte had proved unavailing. On the previous night Matteo Ziani had been struck down and his life was despaired of.

Those who had died by the assassin's steel counted among the staunchest upholders of the old Venetian traditions, who in the council hall and on the field had given their best services to the state.

What fiend in human guise stalked among them, bent upon accomplishing his hellish ends? Precaution seemed of no avail. Ziani had been struck down on his return from a *festa* at the palace of the Morosini, in the very midst of his retainers, who accompanied him with lighted torches.

As he stepped from his gondola onto the water-stairs of his own palace, the fatal blow had been dealt and, in the ensuing panic, the assassin had escaped.

To enhance the mystery, there was a marked similarity in the wounds of the four men, even to the spot where the curved knife had entered.

One by one they arrived, the privi-councillors of the Doge, the members of the Council of Ten, the Avogadori, the Procuratori of San Marco, the magistrates of the Raggione Vecchia and the Raggione Nuova, the Masters of the Commune, the Masters of the Arsenal, the members of the Quarantia Criminale and of the High Court of Justice, the Censors, all in fact who took any part whatsoever in the administration of the Venetian state.

Giovanni Gradenigo, the Doge, alone lingered in the dusky chambers of his dusky palace.

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Ensconced in the shadowy embrasure of one of the high windows overlooking the Piazza of San Marco, Lucio Strozzi and Andrea Mocenigo were engaged in whispered conversation.

The former's eyes roamed gloomily over the persons of the arriving dignitaries. Now and then he commented on the one or the other, as they entered the Council chamber. He seemed, mentally, to divide them into friends and foes, balance the chances of success of the party he represented in the impending struggle.

"The hour is grave," Mocenigo turned to his companion. "The Magyar's insolence is past belief. Morbassan could have done no less — "

Strozzi gave a shrug.

"We have but exchanged one tyrant for another."

Mocenigo regarded him gravely.

"The Gradenigo is not the slave of the nobility."

A baleful light shone in Strozzi's eyes.

"The arm that placed him there can hurl him down. Our trumpets blared too loud."

Mocenigo turned to the speaker.

"Are we to fall to the estate of Hungary's bondsman? Are we to close our ports, do homage to the pirates of Sfax and their confederate, the Ban? Are we to bend our necks before this mongrel, who is but seeking a pretext to impose his master's yoke upon us? There are those in our very midst who have sold themselves, body and soul, to the Ban, who would abrogate our old covenants for the uncertain favor of the Magyar king."

Strozzi shifted uneasily during the impassioned harangue of Mocenigo.

"A brawl at this time will bring the Anjou, the Ban, the Doria upon us. Where are our boasted allies? "

"San Marco is our ally — and the battle of Chioggia is not a myth," Mocenigo interposed sternly. "The Magyar, I

grant you, has used his advantage well. Even now some power of darkness is at work, and murder stalks red-handed in the night. Any tidings?" he turned to a nobleman, who a decade later was destined to wear the hornéd bonnet.

Marco Cornaro stopped.

There was an expression of mingled gloom and distrust on the features of the man whose house was to give a queen to Cyprus, after that island had been reconquered from the Turk.

"There have been messages intercepted that point to a conspiracy in our very midst."

"Are the proofs in the hands of the Council?" Strozzi interposed.

"They are to be presented to His Serenity."

Cornaro passed on. There was a scramble among the senators and nobles to reach their seats as, through the central door, surrounded by his pages, his javelin men, and his Dalmatian bodyguard, there appeared the bent form of Giovanni Gradenigo, the Doge.

Leaning on the arm of an usher in slashed doublet and crimson hose, he mounted the three steps of the dais and took his seat. An air of breathless suspense pervaded the assembly. Every eye was fixed upon the bent form of their prince.

With ringing steps the Dalmatians took up their station at either side of the dais and the Primate of San Marco, surrounded by his choristers and acolytes, his deacons and priests, invoked the blessing of the patron saint of Venice on the assembly and their venerable prince.

The secretary of the Council, in his red robe of office, now arose and announced the nature of the business for which they had been convoked.

After he had concluded, Giovanni Gradenigo arose. His weakness seemed to have fallen from him as a cloak. He stood before the assembly, every inch a prince.

His voice could be heard in the remotest corners of the great hall.

"Is it your will that the envoy of Hungary appear before this august assembly, and state his master's case?"

The Chief of the Forty arose after the Doge had taken his seat.

"The Council has pledged its word that every just complaint shall have redress."

Strozzi turned to the Doge.

"Honour and justice alike demand that the message of King Louis be heard!"

A suppressed murmur filled the hall. The head of the great house of Loredan interposed.

"To grant him audience is to admit Hungary's claims."

"To deny him is to reject them unheard," cried another voice.

Andrea Mocenigo leaped to his feet. With strident voice he cried:

"I protest against this step and all that may ensue therefrom to the prejudice of the Republic."

The staff of the secretary silenced the ensuing uproar.

The Doge had arisen.

"The Republic bears a generous spirit, my lord Mocenigo! She has never quailed before her enemies. She loves alike to be a trusted friend — a noble foe. Let the envoy of King Louis appear before us."

Andrea Mocenigo turned to the elder Loredan.

"It would seem as if, by his fawning arts, the wily Magyar has coiled himself into the senate's favor."

Loredan nodded grimly.

"Long has a creeping rumor filled the world of Louis' ambition and designs, masking a subtle soul in vaunting words!"

"And now his fatal purpose has matured."

"These are the facts familiar to us all! And while we sit and treat, treason enmeshes us on every side."

A loud fanfare of trumpets announced the approach of the

Magyar envoy through the pillared loggia from the sea. Surrounded by his magnificent suite, Count Stephen Bela entered the Hall of the Ambassadors and strode into the presence of the Doge and the assembled dignitaries of the Venetian state, advancing amidst a tense hush up the passage cleared for him to the dais.

After having made his obeisance to the Doge, and placed the message of his sovereign in the hands of the Secretary of the Council, the Magyar envoy stood aside, taking up his station in such a manner as to face at the same time the ruler of Venice and the assembly. His bearing was haughty and from his eyes flashed a scorn which was returned from many a noble in the hall.

Gradenigo, addressing the secretary, commanded him to acquaint the august assembly with the demands of the Magyar king.

The secretary arose and in loud and strident tones read the message.

An audible gasp escaped the assembly.

It was a masterpiece of perfidy and cunning couched in language that said much or nothing, but clearly implied the consequences of a disagreement. Cession of Venetian territory, and an indemnity in gold and ships, the extent of which would crumble the very foundations of her maritime power and cast her, prostrate, at the mercy of her foes — these were the demands of Louis of Hungary.

After the secretary had concluded the reading, the succeeding silence was so tense, that it had to burst of its own weight.

Cries of anger, wrath, resentment roared and hissed through the great Hall of the Ambassadors.

"Shall this audacious robber despoil our dominions?"

"Have we vanquished Turk and Tartar, to fawn at the feet of the Magyar?"

"We will rend this woof of cunning into shreds and cast them at the mongrel's feet."

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Stephen Bela, the Magyar envoy, faced the uproar in stony silence.

The ivory staff of the secretary crashed down upon the table. The uproar gradually subsided.

Lucio Strozzi turned to the Doge.

"Shall our great Republic rush blindly into the perils of an unjust war, to aggrandize a few at the cost of the many? Did not I, Serenity, as your envoy, conclude a treaty with Hungary to endure for twenty years? What are sworn faith, compacts, treaties, when a solemn Council tramples upon them all?"

Like a hurricane the uproar broke out anew.

"It is Hungary, that breaks the treaty —"

"This spurious king, whose measureless ambition, as we treat, clutches, in thought, at our very lives," shouted the head of the great house of the Morosini.

"There's not a man he has not bribed or bought," cried the great voice of Marco Cornaro. "His minions sit in this very hall. Treason stalks in our very midst."

Stephen Bela turned to the speaker.

"You speak of treason, my lord councillor. With what proofs do you uphold your word?"

The great stature of Marco Cornaro towered wrathfully above the speaker.

"Strange customs thrive not on a foreign soil, my lord envoy," he thundered. "You ask for proofs, and proofs you shall have — proofs — which chance cast in my way. With His Serenity's consent — let him who waits stand forth."

There was a sudden scramble. Then a terrible outcry rang through the Hall of the Ambassadors.

Some one had been struck down in the very act of entering in obedience to Cornaro's summons. The crumbled, lifeless body blocked the entrance of the Hall of the Ambassadors.

Pandemonium ensued. Shrieks and execrations resounded on every side. No one paid heed to the Doge. The Magyar envoy and his message were forgotten in the turmoil.

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A panic had seized the assembly.

Senators, nobles and councillors rushed from the Hall of the Ambassadors. No one could tell what had happened. But all felt that within a month the crimson billows of war would roll upon the very shores of Venice.

CHAPTER II

THE LADY OF MYSTERY



On the morning following his strange adventure Zuan was awakened from fitful slumbers by the ringing of the Angelus which all the bells of the lagune city took up, each with its own peculiar voice, from the deep, sonorous strokes of the clock tower of San Marco and the musical clangor of the church *campanili*, to the tuneful, tinkling cadence of the cloister chimes.

He rose with spirits strangely depressed and a dire premonition of coming evil. His hand still clutched the filmy shred to which some strange agency, seemingly not of this world, had led him in the silent watches of the night.

The discovery of the secret passage had intensified the mystery. By this passage, he reasoned, Fulvia had departed. Had she departed of her own accord? Had she passed those mysterious portals living or dead?

It seemed to him that he was emerging from the fitful phases of a nightmare, evoked by the remorseless memories of the past.

It suffered Zuan no longer within these haunted confines, infested by some mysterious force making for evil.

After stowing away the precious relic of the past in his doublet, he sallied forth on foot into the sun-fraught day.

Crossing the Rialto, he cast wandering glances at many a

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Shylock in Jewish gabardine and overheard more than one Bassanio chatting with his friends.

He saw young faces gravely beautiful as Portia's, as barges, bright with gilding, polished wood and varicolored canopies, glided soundlessly past and vanished down the Grand Canal.

Hailing a gondola Zuan instructed the boatman to row him to the Riva.

The supple craft swept down the Grand Canal amid the animation and magnificence of the graceful palaces, that bordered it in a continuous line of elaborately chiselled colonnades and pilasters and balconies, with here and there, high on the wall, the diminutive shrine of a Madonna.

Tied to rusty piers lay pleasure boats with gaudy canopies. Here and there, through open doorways, could be seen a cortilé with plants and vines of luxurious green, or cool, dim hallways with great, white stairs, glistening statues and arched mosaic roofs.

Hardly a glance did Zuan bestow upon the glorious spectacle that met his gaze on every turn and, with a feeling of impatient relief, he alighted at the Riva, where he dismissed the gondolier.

Before him spread the Merceria with its glittering shops and oriental bazaars.

Asiatics in their strikingly picturesque garbs lent color to the motley crowds that swarmed along the broad promenade, Armenians, impassive and grave, Greeks from the Morea, from Zanté, from Corfu, from Cyprus and the Cyclades. Levantine cargoes loaded and unloaded at the quay. Shrewd Venetians were driving close bargains with subtle Greeks.

Turbaned Turks, Kurds from the romantic valleys of Asia Minor, hybrid peoples from Smyrna and Scanderoon, Jews from Spain, Moors from the Barbary coast, Kopts and Negroes from Alexandria enlivened the busy thoroughfare

On the broad waters that stretch between the Lido and the Riva degli Schiavoni and along the Giudecca, gondola, barge

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and barchette threaded their way among galleys of state, slipping under sharp, curved prows, built for ramming, and hulls like those of Hellenic triremes, with long oars, resting in their thowls. Galeasses were being rowed to the arsenal for repairs, with canvas unfurled, galley slaves plying the oars. There were caravels, light craft from the Levant and feluccas that carried merchandise along the coast, forever shifting their lateen sails.

Groups of busy seamen met Zuan's gaze, loading the cargoes of their vessels; wide quays strewn with casks and bales, destined for distant shores; islands crowned with gorgeous domes and turrets, where golden crosses glittered in the light, atop of wondrous churches springing from the sea.

On the wide, glistening expanse the sunlight laid its radiant gleam, a reflex of the brilliant tracery with which Venice has written her incomparable story upon the waters.

It was the hour of the Angelus, when Zuan found himself before the great church of Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari.

The sonorous bell tones of San Marco pealed forth the summons and their ponderous roll dilated in long echoing waves along the mirror of the harbor, vibrated through the island churches, spread afar over the infinite lagune.

From San Giorgio Maggiore, from San Giorgio dei Greci, from San Giorgio degli Schiavoni, from San Giovanni in Bragora, from the churches of the Zatteré, from San Nicolo on the Lido, from the church of the Frari, from the church of the Servi, from San Pietro in Castello, from Santa Maria Formosa, from San Simeoné Propheta, from the far towers of Madonna dell' Orto, from Sant' Andrea, from San Giobbe, bronze voices answered in a tempest of sound, and at the instant the sunset breeze floated off the land and breathed into the dyed sails of the Istrians without a sound, so that the boats began to glide out to sea, as if by magic, over the calm, resplendent water, where stately palaces rose through vapors of purple and gold against the evening sky.

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A last fiery ray shot across the firmament, flashed on the mirror of the lagune, twined round the tapering masts of the dream vessels with their many tinted sails, wrapped its tremulous gold round the tall campanili, garlanded the cupolas and the towers. From the Riva, from San Giorgio Maggiore, from the Giudecca, arrows of fire rebounded upon the wizard domes of the Basilica. Then the dream faded before the purple dusk with its subtle mysteries, its star-jewelled sky.

Venice was beginning her watch of pleasure.

Night always brought with it a note of apprehension and Zuan was not free from secret misgivings when he paused to inquire into the cause of the concourse assembled before the great Franciscan church.

He was informed that the Cardinal of Pavia, sent on a special mission to Venice by Pope Innocent VI, was to deliver the sermon on this evening, and, as an indulgence had been promised to all who would attend the ceremony, the crowd was vast as the sands of the sea.

Presently the great bell of the Frari began to toll and the crowd rolled towards the portals. Some entered, others were grouped on the steps and the water-stairs to await the coming of the great man. Soon ushers came running from within, spread a carpet, and the expectant throngs ranged themselves in hedges on either side.

Now the great central doors of the Church of the Frari were flung open. Clergy and deacons, choristers, altar boys swinging censers, appeared, bearing in their midst the silk-fringed canopy of state.

A great barge swept up to the water-stairs fronting the Church of the Frari. In the midst of his suite and acolytes the Cardinal of Pavia was ascending the steps.

A hush had fallen upon the crowd. Caps and hats disappeared as if by magic. Men and women dropped on their knees to invoke the great man's blessing.

Under the swaying canopy, his right hand raised in bene-

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diction, the Cardinal, portly and dignified, entered the church, and the throng closed in behind him.

The immense blackness of the church stretched vastly upward into its great arching roof, giving to him who stood pigmy-like within an oppression as of enormity. A few torches in remote shrines shed their lugubrious light down the aisles. From chapels and chantries droned the monotone Gregorian chant. The pallid faces of the kneeling Franciscan friars came now and then into full relief, when the fitful illumination shifted, stirred by ever so faint a breath from without.

Zuan slowly wedged his way through the shifting throngs, through gaping crowds of idlers and beggars who besieged the steps of the great church, vying with their Roman brethren in persistence and filth, past *sbirri* and *bravi* and the clowns of the Piazza, who fought among themselves with riotous delight.

Clouds of incense rose in spiral coils and hung blue and wavering beneath the great vaulted roof.

Rarely had the church of the Frari witnessed a more splendid and aristocratic assembly. The heads of the people were as one dark, waving mass beneath the immense arching roof.

Now the organ droned and lights twinkled on the High Altar. Voices droned in Gregorian chant. The Introitus had begun.

Faintly, as though echoed from the threshold of another world, rose the voices of the choir, a low chanting, now swelling into faint harmonies, now soaring aloft in the rich, full notes of a single boy soprano. The strains seemed to hover on the incense-laden air, then dissolve in the majestic span of the great dome above.

As they died to silence the tall, imposing form of the Cardinal of Pavia was revealed in the chancel. A certain austerity in his manner and appearance seemed to inspire instant awe among the vast audience and profound silence reigned when he began to speak.

Among the thousands who had been drawn hither on this extraordinary occasion there was no more attentive a listener

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than a woman who seemed part of one of the great pillars. Her gaze, through the slits of her violet-colored mask, never abandoned the speaker.

She wore a dark violet robe entirely unadorned. It seemed to caress the exquisite curves of her slender, aristocratic form. Her hands and arms were encased in long perfumed gloves of the same hue as her gown, such as were worn in Italy, at the period of our story.

Through the entire duration of the Cardinal's sermon her attention had been undivided, her attitude almost rigid in its immobility. Suddenly she gave a start and, for a moment, swayed as if about to fall.

Zuan, wedged in by the human wall past all possibility of extricating himself, found himself standing but a few paces from the pillar where the woman stood.

He had not seen her as he entered. Now, by some trick of chance his eyes fell upon her swaying form. The words of the Cardinal fell upon unheeding ears.

Was it an hallucination of the senses, was it a trick of the fiend? Had the dead returned to life? Was he going mad? Could nature so mock her own masterpiece as to repeat it in a mad fit of irony?

The stature of the woman was the stature of Fulvia. The head was the head of Fulvia. It was Fulvia, as he had wooed her in her ancestral palace on the Isle of Arbé, the embodiment of that unspeakable something, that he had never found in any other woman on earth.

Would she but turn her face, the face which was the despair of sculptor or painter alike.

Hardly master of himself, resolved to set his doubts at rest, Zuan tried to wedge his way towards the pillar, when he suddenly met with a resistance that utterly paralyzed his efforts, and his eyes looked into those of a black-garbed individual, directed upon him with unmistakable meaning from the slits of his mask.

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Undaunted, he persisted in his attempt, and the ensuing shuffle caused the woman to turn. As she did, their eyes met.

He saw her start, clutch at the pillar for support, turn a second time, then the crowds and the incense-saturated gloom seemed to swallow up her form.

But, when the Host was raised and all were on their knees, the eyes of a kneeling woman strained towards him through the slits of her violet-colored satin visor, that concealed a face framed by a wealth of dusky hair tied in a Grecian knot.

A sickening fear gripped Zuan's heart, the fear for which there is no name, as of one sinking into a bottomless pit.

Was it magic, was it sorcery, that painted Fulvia's vision before his fevered gaze? Had madness laid her talons upon him? For it was Fulvia herself. Had she not recognized him in the same flash?

Meanwhile the holy office proceeded.

Clouds of incense rose about the altar, billowed down the nave. The chanting rose and sank and rose again. Like phantoms seen in a mist, the white-robed Franciscans came and went, genuflecting before the altar. Now the voice of the Cardinal rang through the silent church, now the chanting drowned it. Now twinkling flames, shining ghost-like through the vapors of the incense, preceded the celebrant to the Gospel side. At the *Et Homo Factus Est* the woman turned again. Again her eyes met the eyes of the man.

The conclusion of the Holy Office passed before Zuan's eyes in a maddening whirl.

All his efforts to approach the kneeling form had proved futile. He must wait, wait! God, how he cursed that wait!

The last echoes of the *Dona Nobis Pacem* had died to silence. The throngs began to stream out through the majestic portals into the moonlit Venetian night.

How long, as one encompassed by some deadly spell, Zuan stood rooted to the spot near the now deserted pillar, he knew

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not, nor did he heed the curious gaze of those who passed him, noting his strange demeanor.

Suddenly as if waking from a dream he made a dash for the open portals.

He must overtake her, question her, regardless of the consequences of his daring! Unable to penetrate the shifting crowds he had lost sight of her at the last moment.

Breathless he arrived at the border of the canal, just in time to gain a fleeting glimpse of a woman in a dark violet robe whose eyes seemed to strain towards him as she entered a gondola, that started at once and vanished in the night.

CHAPTER III

OUT OF THE NIGHT



IN the throes of an internal tempest that threatened to uproot his very being, Zuan stood, for a time, as if paralyzed, on the landing place.

The phantom of past pageants seemed to hover on the air. The magic evening seemed to renew the breath and the sorcery of the East, clinging to the hollow sails and curved flanks of the galleys that carried them home with their wondrous spoils.

He stood there, his anxiety growing upon him, as if he were listening to the flight of time, as if the water below was gliding through a fearful clepsydra.

The bells of San Marco pealed the second hour of the night.

An almost pagan joy seemed to spread over the City of the Sea. It seemed as if some hidden force had suddenly dilated the hearts. A tide of sensual life was invading the arteries of man.

And, as if conjured into being by the raised wand of a magician, Piazza and Piazzetta flamed up in a glorious conflagration, like the masted oriflammes of a dream, when the twilight butterfly has fluttered into the velvet chalice of the night.

Rousing himself to the reality of his surroundings, Zuan directed his steps towards the larger square.

Never were reflections more involved than those with which he reviewed the circumstances of the scene, which had just come to a close.

A mystery even more terrible than the first had invaded the night in which he walked.

Losing himself in the intricate labyrinth of intangible surmises, he raged at his impotence to force the solution at the hand of Fate.

Profound gloom settled over him. He cursed the crowds that had blocked his pursuit of the woman. Setting his jaws with a grim determination, he tried to revive his energies that had turned to water.}

The Piazza of the Winged Lion was a blaze of light.

He penetrated to the very head of the square and, returning by the opposite side, found his way through the porticoes, scrutinizing every mask that passed him, when he felt a light touch on his shoulder and, turning in no uncertain mood, found himself face to face with Lucio Strozzi.

An hour ago he would have resented the intrusion. Now he welcomed the nearness of any one who would afford relief to his overcharged feelings.

"Any adventures?" Strozzi smiled, extending his hand in greeting.

"They come unbidden," Zuan replied cryptically.

Strozzi linked his arm in that of the other, drawing him away along the quay. His affable manner of former days seemed to have returned.

"You are favored beyond your deserts."

Zuan shrugged.

"They say Fortune is fickle as woman."

"Like woman, she wants to be wooed."

"I am more convinced than ever that her smiles are not for me," Zuan replied testily.

"If you turn your back upon her — the hair cloth is not conducive to good cheer."

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"Point then the way! Perchance I shall prove an apt disciple."

"Accept what the moment brings. I, too, make the best of things, — notwithstanding — "

"Notwithstanding? "

"My creditors wear masks like myself."

"Lilac dominos? "

His interlocutor gave a shrug.

"I never revel twice in the same disguise."

"I too begin to realize the advantage of change."

"I trust your affairs prosper."

"The mask has its disadvantages at times."

"Outbalanced by its blessings. Here one may walk in the very night of mystery, accountable to none."

There was a brief pause. Then Zuan abruptly faced his companion.

"At the Church of the Frari I saw my wife."

Strozzi gave a start.

"Donna Fulvia? Are you mad? "

Zuan shrugged.

"That is exactly what I wish to discover. For the woman gave a start of recognition as our eyes met."

Strozzi caught his breath hard. Zuan felt a slight tremor shake his arm that held his own as in a vise.

"You met — face to face? "

"We were swept apart by the crowds that filled the church."

Strozzi shook his head dubiously.

"You are the victim of an hallucination. The strongest of your emotions evoked a phantom of the past."

"Yet the woman gave a start. Now — wherefore did she start? " Zuan turned to his companion.

"Donna Fulvia reposes in San Michelé."

A lurid light beamed from Zuan's eyes.

"I, too, repose in San Michelé."

"A chance resemblance deceived you," Strozzi interposed.

"I do not possess the gift to peer behind the mask. She wore a violet satin vizor. As the crowds passed from the church I gave pursuit. I cursed the rabble that rendered my efforts futile. I saw her enter a gondola. That was the last."

"One mask is like another."

"Yet — wherefore did she start?" Zuan persisted.

"Who can say what sways a woman's mind?"

"The misery that has surged back upon me, since I laid eyes upon her, has aroused in my soul not the hope, but the fear, lest she may still dwell in the land of the living — God knows — how —"

"You are under the spell of an obsession. A phantasm of the living, mocking the phantom of the dead."

"Nevertheless, I am most strangely in my senses," Zuan interposed. "Nothing can shake the belief that I have seen Fulvia. Whether in the flesh or the spirit — I know not. Her eyes flashed recognition into mine."

Strozzi listened attentively to Zuan's tale.

"Donna Fulvia's kin mourn her for dead! What stronger proof do you demand?"

"The testimony of my own eyes, the eyes that saw her at the Frari."

There was a brief silence.

The higher-risen moon was shining brightly overhead and glittering in the basin of the lagune, whose tremulous tide was broken into innumerable wavelets by the continuous crossing and recrossing of the gondolas. The garlands of light evoked by the oars, as they dipped into the broken mirror of the water, seemed to encircle the reflections of the fiery angels, that shone from afar, on the towers of San Marco and San Giorgio Maggiore.

"If indeed you desire truth — the certainty of Donna Fulvia's fate — there is a way," Strozzi broke the silence at last.

A questioning look passed into Zuan's tortured eyes.

"My undying gratitude should be his, who can set my soul at rest on that point, at least."

"There is the sexton of San Michelé."

A shudder passed through Zuan's frame.

An unnameable dread had, ere now, deterred him from invading the abode of the dead.

"I, too, boast an epitaph," he replied cryptically.

"Are the circumstances surrounding Donna Fulvia's death known to you?" Strozzi queried with a show of concern.

"I know nothing," Zuan replied tersely "To my questionings the oracle remains mute. Cannot you allay my doubts?"

"Since you desire it, my lord Castello, I wished to spare you —"

Zuan paused. His eyes pierced the other's like twin swords.

"I desire it!"

"It was the plague."

"The plague?"

Zuan gripped the speaker's arms as for support.

"This then accounts for the flight of the servants — the deserted house —."

Strozzi was touched by his companion's grief.

"They were carted away by the score. The gondolas swayed beneath their gruesome loads."

"And they kept me in ignorance of her fate!"

"Such is the mood that sways the Three!"

"One at least has gone to his reward," Zuan interposed fiercely.

Strozzi shrugged.

"Cut off the hydra's head, another grows."

"I am groping in the dark, the hunted of the hunters," Zuan replied with an access of impatience. "Who is he that stepped into Calvo's crimson shoes, this Leopard Prince, whose name is on every lip?"

A fierce oath hissed from Strozzi's lips.

"Some churl, who has tricked the Doge's ear with tales of dangers and conspiracies. The Golden Book knows not his name! There are not wanting those who charge Calvo's sudden death to his successor."

"Where then may one turn in one's perplexity?"

"It is the living who claim your attention, my lord Castello," Strozzi replied. "Let the dead take care of the dead. The people perished by thousands. The nobles fared no better than the rabble. Death is a great leveler of distinction. Your fate, my lord Zuan, still dwells in the memory of man. Dare you interrogate those whose sordid estate would claim the reward of your denunciation? Dare you risk life anew in the endeavor to penetrate the charnel house of death, single handed, defy your implacable foe? Even Donna Fulvia would dissuade you from so rash an impulse, were she still among the living."

Silence had fallen between them.

Once or twice Strozzi's gaze rested slantwise upon his companion. The implacable scrap of satin placed an impenetrable barrier between himself and the object of his scrutiny.

They had by this time roamed far from the centre of Venetian gayety.

Zuan felt the need for reflection. His brain was in a whirl. Strozzi's revelations had opened a dark, unfathomed vista before him. He saw himself standing by the crater of a volcano. The slightest tremor would hurl him to his doom.

Strozzi, noting the impression his dark hints had produced upon the other, maintained a studied silence, as if to allow his words to burn into his listener's brain.

"I see a light," Zuan spoke at last, turning to his companion. "As yet it is but a will-o'-the-wisp, dancing about a tangled marsh of pits and bogs, but yet—a light. My life has been strange and dark. I have loved the shadow rather than the sun. I have dwelt amid strange mysteries—

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but the solution of the greatest is withheld. I shall not fail to seek the sexton of San Michelé. And then — ”

“ And then? ” Strozzi’s eyes hung on the lips of the speaker.

“ I shall pay my respects to the Leopard Prince.”

Strozzi expressing his approval, extended his hand.

“ If I can be of service — command me! Why the course?”

A crowd had gathered before the arch of the clock tower. In the congestion Zuan and his companion became separated.

The centre of attraction appeared to be two maskers who, having apparently met by chance, were indulging in pleasantries between themselves.

The one was garbed to represent a Magyar, the other a Saracen.

“ Your turban, my friend, is strangely out of place in the City of the Sea,” the Magyar addressed the follower of Mahomet. “ Know you not this is a Christian town? ”

The latter gave a phlegmatic shrug.

“ Even if my master’s garb be in disfavor, the Ban has vowed to replenish his harem from the daughters of the City of the Sea.”

“ By your leave, good Turk,” the Magyar interposed. “ Be not over-boastful. You may yet live to see the Magyar Kolpak supplant the Hornéd Bonnet.”

A terrible voice was audible above the din.

“ Who spoke these words? Seize the traitor.”

Instantly there was panic and confusion.

The crowd scattered like chaff before the wind.

A few of the more courageous ventured to remonstrate.

“ The freedom of the mask! The freedom of the mask.”

“ In the name of the Leopard Prince! ”

A band of *sbirri* were entering the dusky arcades of the ducal palace with their prisoners.—

In vain Zuan looked about for his companion of the evening.

Passing through the arch of the Clock Tower, Zuan entered

one of the winding lanes in which perpetual shadows brooded night and day.

After a time he arrived in a dark and lightless region, the winding lanes of which were bordered by hovels, seemingly thrown together, hap-hazard, when the inhabitants of ancient Aquileia sought safety on the scattered islands before the invading hosts of Attila.

The walls were of clay, the roofs of reed and straw, with narrow slits for light and threadbare tapestry for doors. In some of these, with less wretched exteriors, dwelled the modest traders of the port, ship chandlers, dealers in fruits and others who boasted a less honorable trade. The majority of the hovels were taverns and lupanars.

Some of the houses had, alongside the door, signs in Greek, Italian or Slavonic, painted with red ochre on a board of questionable color.

Attracted by a faint signal Zuan stopped.

Some one was calling to him.

An old woman wrapt in a black mantle stood in a doorway.

By the light of an earthen lamp, suspended by a slender chain, he could see several women squatting on mats within.

Ignoring the old hag's invitation Zuan, passing out of the unsavory lane, found himself near the port, where the ships of the Levantine traders swayed at anchor.

The unpaved streets were crowded with nondescript humanity. In the smoky glare of naphtha flames Jews and Jewesses, Epirotes, Sicilians, and half-castes moved feverishly. The night was filled with the unmusical clamor of traders, and the air was heavy with the smoky odor of the lamps.

Dark, narrow streets and sinister-looking alleys lay right and left of him and into one of the narrowest and most uninviting Zuan turned.

In the dimly lighted doorway of a house a sinister, black-robed figure stood, a motionless silhouette. He turned into a narrow court, at the entrance of which stood an iron pillar.

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With the opening of a door the sound of lapping water grew perceptibly. Lighting his capped lantern Zuan let its beam fall below. Cold, damp air touched him. The lantern cast his shadow over unctuous, gliding water which laved the steps on which he stood.

Slimy shapes uprose dim and ghostly from its darkly quivering surface, like the dead faces of the drowned. A boat was swinging from a ring beside the door. Zuan unhitched the lashings and thrust the boat out upon the water. Coming to the first of the dim shapes, he grasped it and thereby propelled the skiff to another beyond. These indistinct shapes were the piles, supporting the structure of a wharf which seemed untenanted.

The black skiff merged with the belt of darkness that spread its sable wings over the wharf. The spot claimed no kinship with human activity. Its dreariness and desolation seemed a fit setting for a tragedy.

After a time the muffled sound of an oar was to be heard.

A boat came crawling through the opaque gloom. Its oar seemed to graze the flanks of the wharf. Now all sounds ceased. Suddenly there came a crash, followed by curses and cries of rage. There was a faint gurgling in the water. Then all was still and silent as before.

Moments passed. A second boat appeared. Zuan crept out upon the plank, the support of which creaked with every motion of the tidal water. At some distance a rough pier showed. Beneath it in the patch of gloom two shadowy shapes followed his every movement with their eyes, as, after landing, Zuan made his way along the dark passage.

Twenty paces beyond the bravi closed silently in upon their prey. The taller of the pair reached Zuan first, only to receive a back-handed blow full in the face, which sent him reeling into the inky tide, in which he disappeared.

Round leapt the assaulted man to face the second assailant.

The bravo, unaware that he had been discovered, found

the deadly steel wrenched from his hand even ere he could raise it to strike. A hand of iron gripped his wrist and, with a wrench that twisted his arm out of its sockets, brought him writhing to the ground.

At the point of his unsheathed dagger, Zuan dragged the ruffian beneath the light of the nearest lantern, that stung the gloom high from a weather-beaten shrine.

Towering over him he regarded the trembling wretch with a contempt he did not try to conceal.

"Still at your old tricks, Cecco," he addressed the writhing shape that started upon hearing his name. "Whom did you expect to shrive at this late hour?"

"You know me, my lord?" the bravo stammered, looking askance at the man, the point of whose weapon pressed uncomfortably against his windpipe.

"Answer me, rogue, or shall I answer the question for you and send you after your fellow?" Zuan queried sternly.

The look of a trapped wild beast passed into the bravo's eyes. A convulsive tremor shook his body as he muttered a name, then cowered, as if expecting a death blow from some unseen hand.

Zuan gave a start.

"The Leopard Prince! What does he in such a place at such an hour?"

"My lord," the bravo replied affrightedly, "it was whispered to me he would be coming this way. So we waited —"

"And, by way of pastime, favored me with your regard."

"We mistook you for him we were instructed to meet, my lord," the bravo replied, by way of apology.

"How unfortunate!"

"Thrice has he eluded us. He is everywhere and nowhere! There are those who aver that he has been seen in different parts of the city at the same time."

"Say you so, Cecco! I too have heard strange tales of him. Some maintain he leads a charmed life and no steel can harm

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him. Yet I knew not he aspired to so daring a feat. How many have you sent butchered to their doom in the service of him who pays your wage? "

The bravo squirmed under the scrutiny of the eyes that were upon him.

"My lord, our trade is sanctioned by the laws of Venice."

"Say rather, rogue, by those who take the laws into their own hands," Zuan interposed sternly. "Let me assist your memory. There is Adrian Cavallo, whom you slew on the steps of San Giobbe. There is Andrea Casale, who met his fate at Santa Fosca. You are partial to sanctuaries, assassin. There is — "

The bravo raised imploring hands.

"By all the saints, my lord, who are you? "

A sardonic smile curved Zuan's lips.

"I am the friend of one who wishes you well. Have we by any trick of chance met before? "

For a moment their eyes met.

Whatever the bravo read in those of the man who towered above him, he averted his face with a groan.

"Gently, my man, lest your drowning friend out yonder think the fiend is calling. I need you, Cecco. Come along! "

The bravo staggered to his feet, stunned, unnerved.

"Proceed and lead the way!" came Zuan's command.

"And remember — one is walking by your side who knows how to use that which he carries in his hand."

At the end of the narrow cut there beckoned a tavern, frequented by sailors and the hangers-on of the port.

"There my commands shall be made known to you," Zuan turned to the bravo in a tone that caused Cecco to shiver as in an ague.

In a short time they arrived at the Inn of the Black Dog and were swallowed up in the murk of the low-ceiled guest-chamber.

CHAPTER IV

A STRANGE PAGEANT



THE days passed and the nights passed and the one merged imperceptibly into the other.

One evening Zuan found himself near the banks of the Grand Canal, mingling with the festive crowds to whom life seemed a never-ending holiday.

The full moon was rising in a silvery haze behind San Giorgio

Maggiore. The great lagune teemed with pleasure boats. Gondolas, barges, *peottas* garlanded with flowers, darted across the glittering expanse.

From the Giudecca to Madonna dell' Orto, from the Merceria to the Piazza of San Marco, from San Nicolo on the Lido to San Pietro in Castello the pulse of the lagune was beating the rhythm of joy, the hymnus of youth, the gladness of life.

In a state of utter absorption Zuan gazed out to seaward, across the estuary of San Marco, lighted by the thousand torches of the night, as if there lay the solution of the mystery.

In the purple background rose the great sanctuary of Venice, a magical dream structure, golden with mosaics, gleaming with ivories, redolent with perfumes, dim with the smoke of incense, holy with the relics of saints.

The higher-risen moon shed her pallid rays on the golden angels of San Marco and San Giorgio Maggiore, kindling the sphere of the Fortuna, crowning the five mitres of the Basilica.

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The Sea-City was queen of the waters and all her veils were rent.

Indifferent to the jests and innuendos of those who passed him on his way, indifferent to the curiosity of others, who cast shy glances at him from afar, Zuan's attention was startled by the acclaim of the multitude in domino and mask. Intent upon learning its cause, he wedged his way through the congestion, and found himself at the water-stairs of the Piazzetta.

The attention of the vast concourse seemed centred on the approach of a gilded barge, with great curved prow, and scarlet sails flapping idly in the faint breeze, that came gliding leisurely over the indigo blaze of the waters, sweeping round the curve where now the great Church of Santa Maria della Salute mirrors her bronze cupolas in the Grand Canal.

Huge oars like golden fins projected from her sides and dipped lazily every now and then, apparently wielded by the hands of invisible oarsmen, whose united forces supplied the lack of the needful wind in propelling the cumbrously quaint galley.

In the wake of this fantastic barge rode gondolas and *peottas*, adorned with many-colored lanterns, twined with garlands of flowers, heading for the basin of San Marco.

Nearer and nearer it came; brighter and brighter in the brilliant illumination glowed the vivid scarlet of its sails. A weird sound of stringed instruments rippled enchantingly over the waters, mingling with the frenzied acclaim of the multitudes, and, as it swung round in a graceful curve, other boats, full of song, full of languid women, gathered round the fantastic barge. The reflection of the lanterns quivered in the water like luminous, multicolored lilies.

The pageant was approaching the water-stairs of the Piazzetta.

As the dentelated iron at the prow veered round with a slow, yet majestic swing, Zuan craned his neck with the rest, but the details of the pageant as yet eluded him.

A confused roar, like the rushing of the air through the coils of a seashell filled the Piazza, resounded through the dusky arcades of the ducal palace.

Nearer and nearer came the barge, leading the fantastic water pageant. Its propelling fins moved more rapidly; another graceful sweep and now it fronted the surging throng like a glittering, fantastic apparition from dreamland.

Golden hangings, draped in rich folds, extended from stern to stern. Golden cordage looped the scarlet sails. A band of young women in fantastically barbaric attire were grouped along the edge of the gilded prow, playing on quaintly shaped instruments.

A score or more of squat, hairy fellows, scrawny, slant-eyed, with curved scimitars, in the barbaric garb of Huns, staring sullen and stolid from beneath their shaggy brows, seemed to form the bodyguard of a woman who was indolently leaning against the middle mast of the vessel, her sombre, dusky eyes resting drowsily on the human wall that lined the water front from the Mole to the Riva, while a frenzied roar of rapture and applause greeted the wondrous spectacle.

As Zuan, from his point of vantage in the very front row of spectators, took in the fantastic apparition, he gave a start.

The woman's face was not concealed by any mask. It was a face he knew, a face which none who had ever set eyes thereon forgot, the face of Yaga, the Magyar princess, the paramour of the Ban of Bosnia.

In defiance of the Doge, in defiance of the Great Council, in defiance of the Three, she was in Venice, and the people applauded and shouted and roared, doing homage to this wicked and beautiful creature.

Zuan's face, under the mask, had grown ashen in the extremity of his trouble. There was a sick faintness at his heart, as his gaze was glued to the form of the woman at the mast.

Wondrous fair, straight as the stem of a lily, she stood there, and, like a lily, she seemed to sway to the rhythm of the stringed

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instruments and the movements of the barge. The youthfulness of her body shone resplendent through the golden tissue of her garments, like a flame seen through polished ivory. The useless regret of each lost joy, the lost memory of every tasted pleasure, implacable passion and desire and the promise of death seemed to float from those dusky eyes through the open balconies of the night, to spread over the torpid waters, to clutch at the unwary heart!

Presently, with a slow smile she extended an arm white as ivory, glistening with barbaric gems. An imperious gesture enjoined silence. Raising a long, slender wand, that ended in the head of a serpent, she described three circles in the air with slow, majestic motion.

At this critical moment Zuan's mask fell from him, as if some one had deliberately severed the strings.

And, as if fate were not content with one maladventure, which exposed his countenance to all who had eyes to see, Zuan at that very moment met the woman's gaze directed upon him, as if her eyes had signaled him out of that vast concourse.

For a moment he absorbed her gaze fully, drinking in the warmth of those dark, witching orbs that flashed upon him, half resentfully, half mockingly.

Then, cursing his fate, he stooped to readjust his mask. Like an icy stream it ran through his veins, when he discovered that the strings had been cut by some unknown hand.

The fantastic barge began to sway gently, starting towards the Riva, followed by the gorgeous aquatic pageant. The Siren Queen, the flowers and the music were slowly vanishing into the night.

Mystery of mysteries! The Princess Yaga was in the City of the Sea!

Utterly resistless, the vessel of his own bewildered emotions, Zuan was taken up by the crest of the human wave and carried into the very hotbed of Venetian frivolity. Aimlessly he

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staggered across the Piazzetta, wandered into the Piazza, then out through the arch of the Clock Tower into the narrow lanes beyond, that lost themselves in their own impenetrable labyrinth.

As waters rush into the vacuum created by the vortex, so his thoughts closed in upon him in a maddening, uncontrollable whirl.

In the midst of his quest there had come another, out of a past teeming with evil and sorrow, a power for evil far greater than any he had yet known, for the beautiful Magyar was not a woman to be denied and there was a page in the book of Zuan's life, which he had hoped had been blotted out forever.

A violent wave of regret and resentment rushed over him. A strange fate had hurled him into a sea teeming with unknown perils. The die was cast. Fulvia and Yaga, the wife he mourned, the mistress he had spurned, were they both about to re-enter his life?

For the nonce his soul isolated itself, grew deaf to its surroundings, withdrew into the circle of the shade. The fatigue brought on by the tension of his mind began to make itself felt. Was Venice, the courtesan, luring him on, the tyrannical mistress whose ageing body was saturated with endless caresses, yet still unknown to him, tired with having lived too much and languished with too many loves?

While trying to bring order into the confused chaos of his thoughts, Zuan seemed conscious of some one walking ever at his side.

This feeling at last became so insupportable that he suddenly stopped and turned to face the unwelcome intruder on his solitude, only to find himself staring into the face of a grinning harlequin.

It was only when Zuan had arrived on the little piazza by the Church of San Paolo, where now Colleone's statue rises out of the shrubbery, that he realized that some one had followed him.

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He turned abruptly and the mask faced him in silence.

"Who are you and what do you want with me?" Zuan addressed the sombre shape in a tone of asperity which could not entirely disguise the slight tremor of his voice.

"The one matters little to the purpose, and as for the other, that is a matter for the lord Castello to determine," the mask replied with veiled mockery.

Staggered upon hearing his own name Zuan turned to the mask.

"What is your wish? "

"The pleasure of your society."

"For yourself or another? "

"For one who will not be denied! "

Quickly resolved Zuan replied:

"Lead then the way! "

CHAPTER V

THE ANCIENT LURE



FOLLOWING the unknown with an air of recklessness that would not recede from any consideration of danger, dread, wonder, anticipation, hopelessly confused in his mind, Zuan and his guide came to the banks of a canal, where a gondola lay in waiting.

The unknown motioned to Zuan to enter and the latter complied

without a word.

Was fate about to reward him, was his star about to rise, guiding him to the port he strained to reach? The stranger took his seat by his side, and the gondolier pushed out into mid-channel.

Zuan deemed it useless to ply his guide with questions regarding their destination. Undoubtedly he would but receive an evasive reply and in his present mood any conversation proved irksome.

Nevertheless he tried to fix certain landmarks.

A curious chill of isolation swept over him, a sense of impending danger that invariably preceded a blow from that unknown source that had wrecked his life.

The gondola flew towards its goal through narrow water lanes, past terraces and quays, where veiled women were passing and repassing and where gondoliers reclined on flagstones and on flights of slimy steps, below stone balconies

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suspended at dizzy heights, past shrines and garden plots, and prodigious piles of architecture, Gothic, Lombard, Moorish, Saracenic, fanciful with the fancy of all times and all countries. Grass-grown courts, deserted lanes, lightless canals, passed in swift and bewildering succession.

Behind San Pietro in Castello the nocturnal lagoon spread moon-silvered to the Island of the Dead, and as the gondola sped through the labyrinthine maze of intertwining canals, Zuan gained a blurred impression of time-stained walls and forgotten cloisters amidst the silent water wastes.

With every moment Zuan's expectations became keener, not entirely unmingled with anxiety.

The dizzy quickening of his pulses informed him that he was approaching an event of more than ordinary significance.

The gondola had entered the Canal of San Palo and slipped into its shade.

All the houses were dark. In the hazy distance a belfry rose, lone and silent, to the stars. The Campiello del Remer and the Campiello del Pistor were deserted, and the grass breathed in peace. The tree branches hanging over the walls of the cloistered gardens felt the leaves trembling in the soft breath of the vernal night.

Now the gondola grazed the water-stairs of an extensive garden, surrounded by a low, white-washed wall, against which the waves lapped lazily. Pointing to the fantastic iron gate, adorned with the heads of griffins and unicorns, his guide invited him with a mute gesture to alight.

No sooner had Zuan's foot touched the landing than the gondolier pushed his oar, and the gondola veered out of sight.

Filled with strange wonder Zuan mounted the steps, and entered the dusky garden. A pergola of vines ran down the centre. Laurels arching overhead afforded refreshing shade during the sunny Venetian high noons. Rows of tall cypresses and pink oleanders added to the charm of the place. Madonna lilies and honeysuckles bordered the paths. Violets and peri-

winkles carpeted the grassy glades under the elm and pine trees.

From an elevated pavilion one looked out upon the glittering basin of San Marco to the white towers and dark cypresses of San Michelé on the one side, the gardens of Murano, then accounted the most picturesque in Italy, on the other, with their fields of musk and damask roses, violets and narcissus, their groves of orange and citron, their beds of rosemary and lavender.

To northward, across the open sea shone the misty outlines of the mountains of Cadore and beyond the spires of the island churches rose the misty crests of the Euganean Hills in the dreaming vernal night.

Every nerve strung taut, Zuan made his way through the pergola, sheltered by heavy foliage from the rays of the moon which sailed in the cloudless azure overhead.

From the pergola there opened a pillared loggia, where three paths converged. Woven sheets of silvery moonlight, insubstantial and unreal, lay upon the greensward. The sounds of lutes and zitherns quivered through the night from afar. The sky was redolent with the magic lustre of a great white moon, suspended like an alabaster lamp in the azure vault overhead. Her rays invaded the sombre bosquets, lighted the trellised rose-walks and cast into bold relief against the deep shadows of elm and cypress trees many feathery fountain sprays, crowning flower-filled basins of alabaster with whispering coolness.

At the entrance of the loggia, half hidden behind a cluster of blossoming orchids stood a woman. Her gaze was fixed upon the leafy pergola, through which Zuan was swiftly approaching.

As he emerged from the shades of the trellised walk he stopped as if blinded by the moonlight, listening as in a dream to a voice that called his name, a voice that caused him to start, caused the blood in his veins to quicken, caused his heart beats to stop.

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"Welcome in the City of the Sea, my lord Zuan," spoke the mocking voice.

Zuan's gaze was fixed upon the woman, whose face seemed to attract the moonlight, a wondrous face, of the creamy pallor of Parian marble, from which gleamed the deep sea-green eyes, eyes that seemed to hold the mystery of unfathomed midnight pools, the wonderful arms, two gleaming stems of ivory, the tawny hair of the sheen of Baltic amber, in which errant moonbeams seemed to have lost themselves beyond retrieve.

The small, crimson lips, slightly ajar, revealed two rows of teeth, small and even as those of some beautiful beast of prey. A nocturnal creature she seemed, forged out of dreams and passions on the anvil of life.

Though she stood motionless, though she was silent, her whole being seemed to vibrate, like melodies round the chord that repeats them; like its rhymes round the closed book where love and pain go in quest of intoxication. All the passions of all the ages, the most terrible and the most magnificent seemed to have dwelled in her body, seemed to live in those marble arms and limbs, seemed to flash in her eyes, breathe in the lips that knew of honey and of poison, of the gemmed goblet and the cup of wormwood. Her soul seemed the receptacle of unquenchable fires, and the white, wonderful hands seemed to have been made equally to caress or to strangle the object of their hate.

The silence lasted apace.

Once again spoke the mocking voice.

"I bid you welcome in the City of the Sea, my lord Zuan. It is a long time since last we two have met!"

Advancing slowly, and with an indescribable grace of motion, the beautiful Magyar held out her wonderful, unadorned hands. Her face, very near to his own, was like an alabaster lamp through which shone cold, yet blinding, the unbridled passions of her soul.

Zuan did not touch the proffered hands, whose whiteness made him dizzy, shrinking back from the woman as from an apparition of the nether spheres.

"Your pardon, Princess! I little expected to find you here."

"Even though you return but scant courtesy, my friend," she said with her mocking smile, "the Princess Yaga bids you welcome in the City of the Sea!"

There was a pause, brief yet pregnant with destiny, for even as she spoke, the consequences of this meeting flashed through Zuan's mind.

What he dreaded most had come to pass. Out of the past she had come back into his life, in an hour when every fibre of his being was dedicated to a cause in which this woman had no part, a cause from which he would not swerve even a hair's breadth.

Nevertheless he dared not disregard the dictates of prudence. He must make the most of the opportunity, trying to penetrate the purpose of the woman's presence in Venice, and time his own decision with her temper.

"I had hardly hoped to meet the Princess Yaga in the City of the Sea," he spoke at last, and something in the tone of his voice brought an amused smile to the woman's lips.

"There was a time you were less formal, my friend," she replied mockingly. "The Princess Yaga in the City of the Sea — fate plays strange pranks with our lives, my lord Zuan, — for surely it is yourself and not your ghost, I am addressing?"

He met the mocking lights of those sea-green eyes, eyes in whose subtle depths lurked dangers greater far than mortal dared surmise. The presence in Venice of the Ban's paramour boded little good for him who chanced to cross her path.

Ignoring her innuendo, Zuan replied:

"Perchance, like yourself, Princess, I am engaged in a post-mortem journey in quest of my lost soul."

Her lips curved in a smile.

"My lost soul! Lost indeed in a fateful hour; lost to one,

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who would not return it. They say some people cannot die. But — why so formal, my friend? It was not always thus! Will you not be seated? ”

“The honor of standing in the presence of the Princess Yaga is sufficient recompense,” Zuan replied coldly. “And now, Princess, will you not enlighten my poor understanding, why I am thus favored beyond my deserts? ”

For a moment their eyes met, then Yaga dropped her gaze.

“Is memory indeed but a myth? ” she replied dreamily. “Surely the man for the love of whom I braved the white hands of Natalie Volutich has still some claim to my affection. Why so gloomy, my friend? Does the memory pain you?”

Zuan replied not at once. His memory reverted to the days when, in the service of the Republic, he was despatched to Ragusa, the hotbed of Bosnian intrigue, to deal the death blow to the secret aspirations of the Ban, and check his encroachments on Venetian soil. For, like Spalato, Zara and Sebenico, Ragusa was even then in imminent danger of falling prey to the greed of the Bosnian and, owing to her wars with Genoa, the Dalmatian coast defenses had been neglected, and the Venetian garrisons depleted.

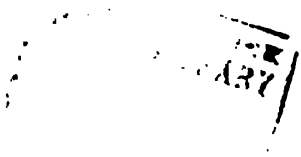
The Ragusan Senator, Volutich, had extended to the Venetian envoy the hospitality of his palace and there Zuan met Natalie, his only daughter, a girl of great spirit and beauty. She was then in her twenty-third year, and ere many days, Zuan discovered that he was far from indifferent to the Senator's daughter.

At that time there came to Ragusa, ostensibly the guest of the governor of Dalmatia, the Princess Yaga. She was of the same age as Natalie Volutich and in point of beauty and spirit a most formidable rival of the senator's daughter. The antecedents of the beautiful Magyar were lost in the dim mystery of her native forests, whence she had come forth, a white witch, to lure men to their undoing.

Zuan's heart, untried in the days ere he had met and loved



"Struck her rival in the face."



Fulvia Zudeneghi, fell a ready prey to the wiles of the sorceress. He became her lover and her slave. She was a strange being to him, mysterious, unfathomable, full of tenderness, devouring passions and much he did not understand.

Natalie Volutich, finding herself spurned for that other, became the prey of a mad jealousy and vowed to take her truant knight from the other woman, at whatever cost.

The feud between Yaga and her spirited rival, which had vaunted itself in mutual taunts, was purposely aggrieved by the beautiful Magyar who openly flaunted the Senator's daughter and dared her, woman to woman, to take her lover from her.

At a feast given by the Governor of Dalmatia to the Venetian envoy the two young women at last met face to face.

Stung by the Magyar's taunts, Natalie Volutich, in the presence of her truant lover, hurled a deadly insult at Yaga. The latter, drawing off her long perfumed gloves struck her rival in the face.

Natalie Volutich, white as death, challenged the beautiful Magyar to a duel to the death.

Yaga leaped to her rival's challenge.

It was what she had desired above all things.

The terrific encounter between the two, forgotten in the stress of the years, was strangely revived by the taunts of the woman who had then seemed to him the embodiment of his keenest desires, now the most hated and feared of him, as he the most hated of her.

Again Yaga's thoughts reverted to the hour when, in a high-vaulted, dimly lighted chamber in the governor's castle at Ragusa, behind doors locked and barred, she had met Natalie Volutich in a duel to the death.

Deliberately she had provoked the encounter, deliberately she had goaded the fair Ragusan to a point where a challenge from one to the other was inevitable, and Natalie Volutich had leaped to the other woman's touch.

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Again every stage of the deadly encounter stood out in her memory from the moment when she and the fair Ragusan had faced each other, woman to woman, in a white silence, each welcoming the hour, tense, with quickened breath, their eyes alight with the desire for the meeting, silently appraising each other's youth and beauty and strength.

Again they goaded each other with insufferable taunts, till igniting at each other's touch, in blind insensate passion, they leaped.

A crimson mist seemed to fill the chamber, through which strained their taunting eyes, their white, encircling arms.

All through the night the duel raged.

Blinded by each other's white beauty, stung to madness by each other's taunts, each succeeding phase of the encounter seemed in its fierceness to exceed the one that had gone before.

Being a perfect match for each other, Yaga was not slow to realize that she was locked in a duel to the death with the beautiful Ragusan. Neither would ever acknowledge the other and, though the taunting smile never left Yaga's lips throughout the encounter, the deadly eyes of Natalie Volutich held a message the meaning of which was not lost upon the beautiful Magyar.

There was a brief lull, during which they faced each other, white, silent, quivering in every nerve, their arms and limbs taut as two wrestlers about to engage in a final test, challenging each other with their eyes.

Then the Ragusan's white arm went out. The tips of her fingers touched her rival's throat.

Yaga leaped to the challenge.

Fire met fire, as they closed anew.

The terrible ordeal through which they had passed seemed only to make them more eager for the conflict.

Yet not a sound escaped to the outer world to give hint of the deadly encounter within the castle between two, accounted at the time the most spirited and beautiful women in Ragusa.

The grey dawn found the men in a deadlock, more eager than before to renew the conflict, had not their mutual exhaustion acted as a barrier for the time.

At parting they had embraced and challenged each other to the death.

Yaga gave a sigh.

Her white fingers opened and closed as if they yearned for her rival's throat.

In her stead had come another — Fulvia of the Zudeneghi.

A woman spurned for another seldom forgives, nor does man enjoy being reminded of his past, upon which he has shut the doors of his youth.

"Why are you reviving a memory that cannot but prove painful to us both?" Zuan turned to the woman who regarded him with a mocking smile.

Yaga indolently extended her statuesque arms.

"Painful? The memory of your white marble saint writhing in the coils of these arms holds nothing painful — for me at least. Natalie Volutich aspired to great things. I never met her equal for spirit and fire. I am a creature of fire myself. Who knows it better than you, my friend?"

Zuan regarded her gloomily, pale as his own ghost, at the memory she had evoked out of the past.

"Why are you here?" he queried curtly.

"I am a creature of impulse," she said, in her melodious voice, smiling into his eyes. "Do you remember the last words you spoke to me, my friend, as we parted in the grey dawnlight?" she continued in her purring accents. "Then you were the master! What are you to-day?"

Zuan shrugged.

"What am I to-day?"

"You, towering before me in the lugubrious majesty of the Venetian executioner gave forth momentous utterance,—"
Yaga continued. "I shall drive you from Venice, should you dare set foot in the City of the Sea. Five years is but a small

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span of time in the brief eternity of our lives my friend! I have been told you have suffered much since then, chiefly the loss of a fair fame, a noble name and an adored wife," she enunciated the word in a manner that drove the blood in crimson waves to his face. Then she continued: "I have been told that Fulvia of the Zudeneghi was very fair. But, remember, my friend, Yaga suffers no rival. You may spurn her love, you may drive her from the City of the Sea. But you may not set another in her place!"

A strange fire burnt in Zuan's eyes.

"Princess, you are presuming on the past."

She gave a shrug.

"On our past, my friend? There is a time for everything, as the philosophers say, and there is a price! The Princess Yaga is not a meek lamb to be sacrificed upon the altar of a posthumous conscience. But we digress. Those are the words you spoke to me, my friend, to me, the woman who had lain in your arms in the glory of your power! The tables, my lord Zuan, are turned. What shall I say unto you? Shall I say unto you: I shall drive you from the City of the Sea, where you are but a myth?"

A smile curved the lips of the man.

"Your humor is delicious, Princess! By what token will you accomplish this feat? In virtue of your halo as the paramour of the Ban?"

There was a strange glitter in Yaga's eyes.

"You are a confirmed pessimist, my friend. There was a time when the very thought of me thrilled every nerve in your body."

"Till I found you the base traitress — perjured, forsworn."

She shrugged.

"You parted from me in anger,— chiefly because I appeared beautiful in the eyes of others, equally discriminating as your own. And, to crown your desertion, my truant lover, you straightway fell in love with that marble statue of the Zudeneghi. And her, too, you loved very ardently."

"Let not her name pass your unholy lips."

"Unholy?" she laughed. "What would you not give this very moment to kiss, as of old, these unholy lips of mine? Come — my lover! You may! See how I can forgive your insults!"

She opened her shimmering arms and her white teeth gleamed through the crimson portals of her lips. Something in Yaga's veiled irony struck Zuan with sinister import. She seemed to know more than she cared to reveal about the wife of his heart, Fulvia of the Zudeneghi. It was more than a chance shaft she had sped at his listening heart.

Yaga was watching him narrowly.

"I am waiting, my truant lover."

He braced himself with an effort.

"You call it love you gave to me?" He spoke in accents of bitter reproach, not unmingled with contempt. "If it must be told, I did succumb to your insidious charms, ere I fathomed the whole immensity of your deceit. Love like yours must bring dishonor on whomsoever accepts it."

"And yet — see how they fever for this beautiful body of mine —"

"Swine, like the Bosnian, whom every true woman would shun as the plague!"

She smiled, but her face was very white.

"My friend, let not the Ban's name pass *your* unholy lips!"

Zuan shrugged.

"Your fame, Princess, needs no herald to proclaim it to the world."

"Neither does my beauty! And the revilings of disgruntled lovers and those who have sought, but failed to find, solace for the loss of these arms, I laugh to scorn!"

Approaching him she laid her bare arms upon his shoulders, her face upturned to his.

"Why waste the precious moments that remain in heaping hot coals upon each other's heads?" she continued tenderly.

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"Sit by my side in the moonlight, as of old, my friend, and tell me about yourself. In those long years of your journeyings into unknown lands you should have made many a sultan tremble for the loss of his odalisque. And all these years I dreamed but of you,—longed but for you! How I envied, how I hated that other woman to whom you fled for shelter from these allurements. But I have been avenged, my friend, gloriously avenged."

She was watching him from between half-shut lids.

The blood froze in Zuan's veins.

"Avenged?"

She gave a little nod.

"Where is your beautiful wife to-day, my friend?"

"That I would give my life to know."

"Do you then still love her so much?"

He lowered his gaze, but made no reply.

"Were I the woman you hold me to be, I should glory in your discomfiture. As it is, I offer you myself in her stead. Is not this love?"

He gripped the strong, supple wrists. The touch of her white hands seemed to electrify him.

"What know you of this matter?" he queried imperiously.

Yaga raised her eyebrows petulantly.

"Am I the keeper of Venetian state secrets?"

"Is Fulvia among the living?"

Yaga's eyes shot fire.

"Were she among the living, my lord Zuan! In my veins flows the blood of the ancient Magyar kings. Deem you I would brook a rival?"

Her demeanor had undergone a sudden change. She was now every inch what she proclaimed herself to be.

"I fear it would not be of your choosing, Princess," he replied, stung by her taunts.

Yaga was toying with a barbaric ornament which dangled from the end of a chain.

"You will persist in interrupting the train of my thoughts, my friend," she continued sardonically. "Cannot you guess why I have summoned you?"

Her former hauteur sank to the tones of sweetest blandishment.

"Surely not to revive a past that is closed forever."

"A harsh and cruel word."

Again she laid her white hands upon his shoulders and sank her eyes into his. The faint eastern perfume that clung to her crept to his brain.

"The author of your death in life perchance strides the piazzas with impunity."

"Again — what know you of this matter?" Zuan queried fiercely.

"What every one in Venice knows."

Zuan gazed fixedly at the woman.

"And what is your own part therein?" he spoke, after a pause. "How dare you show your face in Venice?"

"Dare?" she interposed with her mocking smile. "Have not you — has not every man, woman and child in Venice looked upon my face, the one unmasked face, save your own and perchance the poor old dotard's under the hornéd bonnet? All Venice did I challenge and defy; I defied your Doge, I defied your Leopard Prince and his spies, I defied your *sbirri*, your Secret Tribunal, your Great Council, yourself. And no one will dare so much as to breathe into my ear a word that might rouse my displeasure. I bear a charmed life, my friend."

Zuan shook himself free of her touch. For a moment she quivered as if stung by a whip lash, the cold, beautiful face white as lightning.

With an effort to steady his voice he spoke.

"What interest can the Princess Yaga profess in the man who, though at one time her bond slave, hates her with a hatred enduring as the stars? How can he in turn believe the words of the Ban's paramour?"

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He deliberately gave his words the deadly sting, hoping she would emerge from behind her mask.

To his utter surprise she did not seem to resent them. Had she turned upon him, a woman at bay, he was ready for the conflict. He was not prepared for her present mood.

Resting her hands on his shoulders she compelled his eyes to meet her own.

"You hate me to the death, because you love me, Zuan," she crooned, nestling close to him, "because you tore yourself from these arms reluctantly, as one rushes from the intoxication of a feast that benumbs the senses. You hate me, because you hunger for the embrace of these very arms, for my caresses, for my love, — call it by whatever ill-sounding name you will. You never did love Fulvia, as you loved me."

"Silence!" he thundered.

She smiled into his eyes.

"Not as you loved Yaga!" she challenged him defiantly.

"No, not as I loved you; thanks to God for that!"

She regarded him with an amused smile. Her arms crept around his neck.

"These wonderful arms of mine will not go begging, my friend."

"What new deviltry is now in your mind?" he flashed, trying to release himself.

"Why continue to arraign me at the judgment bar? After all, you never understood! If I did not love you, would I have spied you out, the nameless exile who has nothing to offer but his love? Would we be here in this enchanted garden — you and I? I alone can help you. I alone can point the way. Not to the arms of one who no longer walks the earth. But to revenge. And revenge is sweet."

Zuan felt the coils of those white tightening arms about him. A kiss burnt on his lips.

He tried to extricate himself from her embrace, that seemed to draw life and soul out of him. She only clung the more

persistently, kissing him again and again with moist lips, that made him dizzy.

"What is your price?" he gasped, brutally, hoping thereby to break the spell.

She seemed utterly disconcerted.

"Your love, Zuan, is all I crave. What else have you to give?"

He started at her words.

Did she love him, indeed, or was this but another of her unspeakable tricks?

"You know, that may not be —"

"What has been, may be again —"

"The book of the past is closed."

"If I seem persistent, my friend," she smiled, with a tinge of sadness in her tones, "which I need not be, as you perceive, — it is because you are a stranger to your own mind! Your senses are starved. They cry out for some one to love, and, here I am, offering you love, youth, your heart's desire, — offering you myself, young, passionate, beautiful — and you spurn me for a phantom — a phantom of the past!"

"What of the Ban?"

She gave a shrug.

"The barbarian amuses me! He is one of those strange beasts ever teeming with untoward moods and whims. His latest is to take from Venice her island possessions, Arbé, the home of your beloved. How I hate Arbé — and Venice, — and the woman who took you from me," she cried out in a strange access of passion. "And you, too, hate Venice, my lover, the silent, treacherous city, that has taken from you your name and all you hold dear. What better reason can there be for us to work, hand in hand, to achieve that which we both desire?"

Relaxing her white arms she stood before him, erect and wonderful in her white beauty, and as he looked upon her desire seized him by the throat with a wild, maddening impulse and his heart beat furiously against his breast. More than

ever he realized the power of the woman, and he knew that surrender spelled his doom. The magic of her presence, all the good, all the evil, condensed into years of suffering, heart-ache, deprivation, rushed through his being, in one mad, headlong cataract.

"How dare you show your face in Venice?" he reverted to his former question, fighting down the emotion that had him by the throat.

She shrugged, beaming upon him one of her rare smiles.

"Whence my truant lover promised to drive me with fire and sword, and weird incantations? Nevertheless I am minded for the nonce, to convict the prophet of his utterance."

"I am listening," he replied with enforced calm.

"Does it mean so little to you, my friend," she spoke in her strangely vibrant voice, "that, heedless of the risks, I have chanced all to bring about this meeting? Do you regard it so lightly, that the Princess Yaga, desired of many, offers her love, herself, to the nameless exile, who dares not show his face in the places where men walk?"

"And what has the nameless exile to offer to the Princess Yaga in return for so priceless a boon? For, surely she does not barter her wares for so poor a consideration as the regard of one who stalks in the shadow of the executioner?"

A petulant gesture stemmed the flow of his words.

"Why will you not understand?" she said in a tone of entreaty. "Who knows, but I, too, have a wrong to avenge."

"You, Princess?" he laughed harshly.

She did not heed the arraignment.

"Venice, my friend, is our common foe,—yours and mine!"

"Venice is an exacting mistress, that brooks no rival," he said sternly, "and the Leopard Prince, if rumor speaks true, has the thousand eyes of Argus."

A strange smile curved Yaga's lips.

"What of the charts of the Dalmatian forts, that disappeared so mysteriously with your beautiful wife?"

With a choked outcry Zuan turned to the woman.

"How dare you?"

She gave a tantalizing little laugh.

"Oh, I can tell you much, my friend, things at the mention of which Hell itself would shudder."

Zuan's eyes seemed to pierce her through and through.

Yaga did not flinch.

"What is your part in this?"

There was a strange light in the woman's eyes.

"I serve my own ends, my lord Zuan," came the mocking reply.

"The recovery of the stolen charts spells the vindication of a name, once unblemished and fair."

"Everything, my lord Zuan has its price —"

"What is yours?" he queried brutally.

"My love —"

"If I refuse?"

She regarded him fixedly.

"A nameless death."

There was a brief silence.

Zuan's eyes, probing the depths of the thickets beyond, saw something that gave him pause. The shrubbery was teeming with moving shadows, creeping hither and thither with stealthy, noiseless tread between the interstices of the branches.

Not a flicker of his eyelids betrayed to the woman what he had seen.

He saw the abyss, at the brink of which he stood. Yaga's words had revealed a perspective that caused him to recoil with dread from the woman and what she stood for. Here a delirium of the senses, there the shadow of the executioner, towering between the rose pillars on the Piazzetta.

The choice still remained with him. He might temporize, returning guile for guile, in order to penetrate the purpose of her presence in the City of the Sea.

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Zuan decided to burn his bridges. He dared not trust himself with Yaga. One cannot hope to play with fire and escape unscathed. One enemy the more — what mattered it, after all!

Raising his eyes to those of the woman, he spoke.

"Princess, my choice is made."

Yaga was regarding him with an expression inscrutable as the sphinx of the desert.

She knew she had lost, even ere he spoke.

"The honor of being accounted one of the lovers of the Princess Yaga is no doubt great," Zuan spoke slowly, deliberately. "Nevertheless, Princess, I must needs be content with the lot which fate and your generosity have decreed for me."

There was something in Yaga's eyes he had never seen in them before.

Her whole body was tense, rigid, the beautiful face white as lightning.

Raising one white arm she made a sign of dismissal.

"You have made your choice, my lord Zuan! Sometimes fate grants us the dream, but denies the awakening."

The spectral rays of the moon broke here and there, through the leafy canopy overhead, and dreamlike the sounds of a barcarolle were wafted through the silence from somewhere out on the nocturnal estuary, as Zuan made his way towards the water gate.

CHAPTER VI

THE HIDDEN CHAMBER



E shift the scene of our drama to the dark and gloomy palace situated behind the cloister church of San Silvestro, an island fortalice laved by the waters of a stagnant canal.

The frowning masonry of Strozzi's abode which, on its four sites, rose literally out of the unstable element, resembled

in its massive exterior rather a castle than a dwelling, part and parcel of the sinister gloom that pervaded the region.

Standing aloof from the massive palaces that bordered the San Rio canal, remote from the main water arteries of the city, the Lombard pile towered sinister and lugubrious above the silent water lane which it dominated, as a castle dominates the mountain pass, and the long range of narrow lancet windows seemed to hint at chambers whose gloom and silence were rarely disturbed by sounds of mirth and merriment, rarely invaded by the rays of sun or moon, or the notes of gayety, that enlivened the principal water lanes of the City of the Sea.

In a deep, semi-domed alcove, approached from the main chamber by a short avenue of Doric pillars, such as we find in the Lombard palaces of the Scaligeri, Sforza and Visconti, roofed with a mosaic of gold and ultramarine, stood, saturnine and lonely, Lucio Strozzi.

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His short-skirted tunic, puff shouldered and pinched and pleated at the waist within a gem-incrusted girdle, was of Damascene silk, crimson-colored and lined with costliest fur. His hose were of black satin. His buskins, of crimson velvet, sparkled with rosettes of rubies. His head was covered with a black velvet biretta, sewn with pearls and a short, jewelled dagger dangled at his side.

With clouded brow and compressed lips he paced the narrow confines of the chamber which was lighted by a single candelabrum that shed a mournful illumination over the scene.

Now and then he paused, as if listening to the sounds of revelry that came to him, muted, from afar, from gaily decked gondolas that sped hither and thither on the dark waterways with their cargo of youth and joy and laughter.

They seemed to intensify his discontent, to rouse him to positive anger.

"Fools!" he mused, as he continued his perambulation, "gliding over the shimmering surface beneath which corpses fester! The Arab word is true. Each man wears his fate bound about his neck. The lagune gives up its dead and terror weaves its spells about my heart! Too long have I wavered! And now as the goal looms up beyond the mists of chance, a phantom of the past intrudes between myself and my desire! She, too, is strangely silent. Has she, too, seen the vision? Or, does my fear distort the peril?"

He paused, and, as he stood there between the high, lancet-shaped windows, no one would have dared conjecture what were his thoughts by gazing at his countenance.

He might have been planning some dark conspiracy, that would make him lord of the great city stretched below. He might have been planning some new and startling refinement of sensual pleasure or, more dreadful than all, reviving some dark memories of his past.

The music on the canals had ceased. There was silence in the strange, walled enclosure, save for the murmur of the waves

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and the distant sounds of bells from tower and campanile.

With a passionate gesture of reprobation and hate, he continued his walk. The hidden thing in his eyes was hidden no longer. Some nameless being was looking out of the windows of the soul. Yet the rest of the face was unruffled and expressionless and the contrast was so horrible that a spectator would have shrunk away, cold fear gripping his heart, perchance a scream upon his lips.

Had it overtaken him at last? Had the hour tolled of which he had stood in constant dread?

Strozzi struck a gong. Almost ere the sound had died away, a secret panel in the wall receded, admitting a masked shape in a long, black cloak.

Strozzi surveyed the gloomy apparition as it stood at attention.

"Your ears have been open in the Piazza?"

"Ill tidings, my lord. Some one has laid a curse upon all our enterprises. The Lord Andrea of Pisa was found hanging, head downward, between the pillars on the Piazzetta."

Strozzi started with an intake of his breath.

"Are you mad, Sordello? The Lord of Pisa? Surely your eyes are befogged by the wine-cup."

"Would they had seen false, my lord! Nor is that all —"

"Cease your raven's croaking and tell your tale!"—

"Mugello — he who was to await the coming of Giacomo Mocenigo, has been taken from the Orfano Canal."

"An accident like any other" —

"In which he lost his head," Sordello replied grimly.

"Ill luck to him!"

"An expert piece of work, my lord! Nor is that all!"

Strozzi's eyes glared.

"The devil take you and your evil tidings! Must I choke the words out of your damned carcass?"

"This paper was found pinned to the body of the lord Andrea."

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Strozzi snatched and unfolded the parchment.

A hiss escaped his lips.

"The Leopard Prince!"

His hands folded across his back he walked up and down the chamber. When he spoke, the voice cut the silence like a Damascene blade.

"Know you it is death to remove this from the person of one adjudged?"

The bravo shrugged.

"A chance like any other — and a warning to my lord —"

"Warning indeed!" Strozzi retorted. "We shall see, who shall prevail! You kept the tryst?"

"At Santa Maria Zobenigo, my lord!"

"Speak, man, speak!"

"At the stroke of midnight, one approached the entrance of the bridge — muffled and masked. He paused and struck the wooden floor three times with the end of his scabbard —"

"And then?"

"He waited while one might count a score. Then a second came out of the shadows, received something and turned back, walking in the direction of San Sepolcro."

"You trailed him?"

"As his shadow. At the border of the San Geremia Canal I lost sight of him. — He darted into a lane and vanished."

Strozzi paced the confines of the chamber.

"Would you know him you met at Santa Maria Zobenigo, were you to meet again?"

Sordello gave a nod.

"We learn to discriminate in the service of the Republic, my lord."

Strozzi produced a paper.

"To-morrow at the second hour of the night you will be on the Broglio. To him, who shall make his presence known to you by this same sign, you will deliver this token. Without tarrying or bandying words, you will pass out by the Canal

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della Paglia, retrace your steps towards the Piazzetta and resume your wonted station between the pillars. What of the stranger? "

"He stalks the *calli* as one who seeks."

"You trailed him? "

"To a certain house near Madonna dell' Orto, where none in his right mind will spend the night."

Strozzi wheeled upon the speaker with an expression that caused the bravo to recoil.

"Ha! I might have guessed! The dead always haunt the places to which they are drawn by associations of their former lives."

The bravo permitted himself the luxury of a shrug.

"I know not, my lord, unless he consorts with the devil."

"Yet he came forth again? "

"He came not forth again that night, my lord."

Strozzi continued his fevered pace, and Sordello noted the evidences of a great mental disturbance that seemed to hold him in thrall. Once or twice he paused directly before the bravo, but aside from a wrathful glare, bestowed upon him no further mark of his consideration. Once or twice, too, Sordello heard him mutter some unintelligible phrases that fell unheeding from his lips. They shivered to silence, a silence that grew oppressive with its own weight.

"Was this the only time? " Strozzi turned on the bravo.

A negative gesture came in response.

"No, my lord! The stranger seems to fancy the abode, preferring the society of ghosts to that of men. For nightly he returns and comes not forth again till dawn."

There was a feverish lustre in Strozzi's eyes.

"And you tell me this but now, fool? "

"My lord's orders are to trail the stranger. My lord's orders were obeyed."

The look which Strozzi bestowed upon his henchman added little to the latter's comfort.

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"I will know what he does there!"

"There is not a man in Venice, my lord, who would spend a night under that haunted roof for all the gold there is in the coffers of the Republic."

Strozzi paused before the speaker. "Am I to arrange my affairs to suit the mood of you fellows? I say I will know what he does there, among the dust and mould of those silent walls. Some one must enter with him. Yours is a practised eye and a ready blade, Sordello."

The bravo recoiled as if he had seen a snake in his path.

"I, my lord?" he expostulated. "My blade fears no living man. But a ghost, my lord? And I in mortal sin?"

A fierce, disparaging gesture cut him short.

"I aspire not to become your confessor, Sordello. You will accompany the stranger to his lair. How you accomplish this feat, let that be your affair!"

The bravo raised imploring hands.

"My lord, the house is in ill repute and he who goes there knows not what he does."

"Many a one stalks in the broad light of day and knows no more," Strozzi interposed sardonically. "However, let not the flimsy denizens of the beyond turn your blood to water. A mischance works the same harm, Sordello, by whatever name you call it. Which reminds me! Can you wield an oar?"

Sordello shivered under the basilisk gaze that was upon him.

"Once upon a time, my lord," he replied, glad to change the subject, "His Serenity himself would have placed the golden chain about my neck."

He stopped short and shivered.

"Had not a certain scar betrayed you?" Strozzi interposed, with a lurid smile. "Know you, Sordello, that every woman and child would point their finger at you were you to appear unmasked in the Piazza?"

Sordello's eyes shot fire, but he controlled himself.

"What is my lord's behest?"

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"If I read the stars aright," Strozzi continued, "the distinguished stranger will shortly require the services of a gondolier."

A look of understanding beamed in Sordello's eyes.

"See that he obtain an expert oarsman, Sordello! And remember! I will know what he does in that haunted den!"

Dismissing the bravo, Strozzi continued his fevered perambulation.

Suddenly he paused, struck the gong and, ere its last vibrations had died to silence, a bat-like shape, dark and sinister, stood in the room, as if it had materialized out of the empty air.

Through the mask gleamed two eyes, the expression of which might have struck terror into the bravest heart. A ghoul, risen at midnight from its narrow berth in some forgotten grave, it seemed to have been present in the chamber all the time.

"Stiatta!"

"My lord!" croaked a voice that seemed like a premonition of disaster.

"How fares the lady Fulvia?"

"Her tongue is silent, my lord, though her eyes speak volumes."

"You are an apt reader, Stiatta! Whence these symptoms?"

"Ever since that affair at the Frari."

"It is of this I would learn."

"She came near swooning, had not aid arrived in time."

"You were near her?"

"As ever, my lord."

"What then?"

"When she recovered, she asked if I, too, had noted the stranger?"

"What stranger?"

"I denied having seen any one in particular when he was suddenly upon us."

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"Can you venture any reason for Donna Fulvia's strange demeanor?"

"My lord, I did not follow her into the church, much as I stand in need of its consolation."

"You have kept strangely silent on this business, Stiatta!"

"My lord, something gripped my throat—a dead hand coming out of the water!"

"Silence!" thundered Strozzi. "Have I been blind as well as deaf? You were not to abandon Donna Fulvia's side for even a moment."

"Pardon my lord. I looked for no evil in so holy a place. I awaited her return among the beggars that crowded round the portals. When Donna Fulvia came forth, she was pale as a corpse and a feverish lustre shone in her eyes. After a time a black domino came rushing down the cathedral stairs, up to the landing, where he paused, staring wildly in every direction. Pardoné and Alvano were at hand and, more dead than alive, the lady Fulvia entered the waiting gondola. The last we saw of the black domino, he was standing at the landing, staring after the vanishing craft."

"Where is Donna Fulvia now?"

"In her chamber, my lord, engaged in some unholy incantation. At least such is my surmise, for she weeps and laughs in turns. Yet there is no one near. All day long she has been gazing out upon the canal, watching the passing craft."

Strozzi's growing fear took the form of anger.

"Has it come?" he muttered, without heeding Stiatta's presence. "So be it! I shall know how to meet it. To your spy-hole, Stiatta! I shall myself attend Donna Fulvia. If you would prosper, you will be wary."

After the castellan had departed, Strozzi approached a panel covered with tapestry and differing in no wise from the rest of the wall and touched a hidden spring.

The panel receded, revealing a dark aperture.

For a moment Strozzi paused.



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“The Leopard Prince!” he muttered. “Is he no myth then after all? Be it so! I accept the challenge!”

With elastic step he entered the panel which closed soundlessly behind him.

CHAPTER VII

TRUTH AND FALSEHOOD



ENTERING a gloomy gallery Lucio Strozzi followed its serpentine windings to a remote wing of the palace. After mounting a dark stair, lighted by the fitful rays of a cresset, he came to a massive, oaken door. Pausing, he listened, then entered soundlessly.

He stood in a chamber of more than gloomy splendor, shrouded in tapestries of crimson velvet, that fell in heavy folds upon a carpet of the same sinister hues. A shaded lamp of oriental design stood upon a table of onyx, throwing the greater part of the room into shadow. A strange, pungent perfume hovered on the air, but so still was everything within, that Strozzi paused, looking apprehensively about.

A shadow, materializing into the form of a woman, emancipated itself from between the crimson hangings, and Strozzi stood face to face with the fair occupant of the chamber.

Fair, indeed, she was, with the fairness of a goddess. Her face was of the creamy pallor of Parian marble. The features were flawless in their chiselling. From the wide sleeves of her robe, violet-colored and unadorned, two statuesque arms gleamed white as alabaster.

To Strozzi everything appeared as a crimson blur, through

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which shone the woman's taunting eyes and, as they faced each other in a white silence, all the passion of his soul welled up in his throat.

Like a marble statue she seemed, suddenly come to life; only the white fingers, rigidly intertwined, the slight tremor of the tense arms, betrayed her emotion.

A forbidding light in the woman's eyes checked him as he advanced to meet her, caused him to quake in the remotest depths of his being, caused the greeting that hovered on his lips to remain unspoken.

There was an expression in the woman's eyes he had never seen before. Like the eyes of Medusa, they seemed to turn him to stone.

No accusations, ever so fierce, no reproaches ever so bitter, could have equalled the effect of those eyes. They seemed to paralyze his faculties, hold him spell-bound, where he stood.

"Fulvia!"

There came no response from the woman, who faced him like a statue, and the interminable silence became insufferable, maddening. The man's restraint was giving way. In another moment he must shriek under the silent accusation of those eyes that would not relinquish his own.

"Fulvia!"

Like a sword blade it hissed through the supervening silence, a word from a woman's lips under which he cowered as if struck by a whip lash, and the last vestige of color fled from his cheeks and left them bloodless as the face of a corpse.

"Liar!"

He made a forward step as if to crush her in his embrace, but something staid him, for the first time in his life.

Fulvia's eyes seemed literally to cut through his flesh.

"Another step and I shall kill you with my own hands!"

Strozzi forced his eyes to a level with her own.

"Of a certainty, a frosty welcome, Fulvia *mia*," he replied,

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vainly trying to equivocate. "Who has been with you?"

She regarded him fixedly, with those eyes whose sweetness even hate could not entirely obliterate.

"Memory."

His brain was working at fever heat. Stiatta had spoken truth.

"I was never an adept at solving riddles, Fulvia *mia*," he spoke in a supercilious tone. "Who has ruffled your spirits? Is it Stiatta?"

He stopped short under the inscrutable look of the eyes that were upon him.

"I could find it in my heart to kill you where you stand and, by the living God, I shall, if this thing be true!"

"Surely you are mad, Fulvia," Strozzi interposed with an air of offended dignity. "I came, prompted by anxiety, after learning of your attack by a madman. He will be dealt with according to his deserts."

"And who will deal with you according to your deserts?" she flashed.

With a bound he was at her side. His hands gripped the white wrists.

For a moment they held each other's gaze and the man read in the woman's eyes that which caused him to relax his grip.

She wrenched herself free.

"What have I done! What have I done!" she moaned. "Zuan, my beloved! What have I done!"

Strozzi's eyes glittered like steel.

"You are calling on one long dead, Fulvia *m* one who expired under the executioner's axe," he replied sardonically.

"Whence this sudden access of reminiscent affection?"

She wheeled upon him with a fever of passion that caused him involuntarily to recoil.

"Perjured and forsworn!"

She looked more beautiful than ever in her anger and he hungered to crush the alluring form in his embrace. But her

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attitude of scorn, fury and abhorrence was slowly beginning to kindle the fires of his own wrath.

"Zuan lives!" she continued and, with all his cunning, Strozzi could not meet the eyes that burnt into his own. "And I shall find him, were he hidden in the very caverns of death."

"A likely abode," Strozzi replied darkly. "One seldom escapes the judgment."

"What was your part in this foul deed?" she flashed. Strozzi cringed under the directness of her accusation.

"The nature of his crime is known to you, Fulvia mia. It is known to every man and woman in Venice."

"I desire to hear his arraignment from your own lips."

"He betrayed the secrets of the republic to the Ban."

"Who was his accuser?"

"He was his own accuser."

"Then he confessed?"

"He denied his guilt."

"And was condemned?"

"The Three do not temporize."

"You were his friend. What effort did you put forth to save him from his doom?"

Strozzi threw up his hands with a theatrical gesture.

"Who am I to sway the mood of the secret tribunal?"

"Perchance it was to your interest not to do so?"

"Really, fair lady, you are speaking in riddles."

"I shall be plain enough anon!"

"What part had I in his undoing?"

"It is even this I wish to learn! How much longer must I endure this indignity?"

"I fear, fair lady, such is your predestined fate," he replied sardonically. "Even the Holy Father cannot dissolve our union."

"Built on the memory of a lie!"

"I love you," he cried, snatching her hands and clasping them with a strength that all her resistance could not release.

"My love for you is like some deadly poison, that sets my blood on fire. Fulvia, have pity!"

"For you?" she cried, snatching her hands from his grasp.

"For me, even for me!" he implored. "For once turn your eyes upon me without hate and see how this passion has corroded my life! Deliver me from this living hell, into which your hate has plunged me! He, whose name you call, betrayed you even as he wooed you!"

She regarded him with unutterable scorn.

"Your poison shafts cannot penetrate the armor of my love."

"You are afraid of the truth, Fulvia *mia!*" he spoke, his eyelids narrowing till they seemed but two slits in the ashen face. "All women are cowards when it comes to that."

Her contemptuous silence stung him to the quick.

"Discarding as unworthy the sordid consideration of gain," he continued, after a pause, "what motive would have prompted the lord Castello to commit a crime the penalty of which is death?"

She met his gaze without flinching.

"Have you no theory, Fulvia *mia?*" he continued suavely, encouraged by her silence. "What of the passion for a woman?"

"The passion for a woman?" she repeated slowly. "How could Zuan's love for me drive him to such a pass?"

"His love for you, Fulvia *mia?*" he laughed sardonically.

"For whom then would he do this thing?"

Her face was very pale.

There was a semblance of truth in Strozzi's words, and, though she knew him capable of every crime, could it be that there was a phase in the great mystery which had eluded her, which she had never fathomed?

Strozzi knew women too well not to profit by the change of mood he had warily evoked. Step by step he would lead her on, till the climax, like a thunderbolt, shattered at once her resistance and her dream.

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"The lord Castello, in the days ere he wooed the beautiful Fulvia of the Zudeneghi who rewarded his love with her hand and heart, was oft-times absent in Dalmatia," he said, reminiscently.

Her eyes were on his lips.

"On business of state."

"At his own request," he lied.

"That was in the days before the consummation of our union," she protested.

"His goal more often was Ragusa. Did he ever confide to you, Fulvia *mia*, the true motives for these all too frequent excursions to the border lands of the Republic?"

She made no reply beyond a shrug.

Her heart was heavy to breaking. What dark secret was about to be unfolded to her listening ears, intensifying the mystery that shrouded her life?

"Can it be," Strozzi continued suavely, "that the lord Castello's consort alone is ignorant of that which every fish-wife in Chioggia, every gondolier in Murano, is retailing by the fireside? That, immersed in her ferocious chastity, she has never heard the tale of the hot rivalry between the daughter of the Ragusan senator and the Magyar Princess Yaga, and how the beautiful Magyar and her no less beautiful and spirited rival almost destroyed each other in a duel to the death in the castle of Ragusa? I am relating but matter of common report. Can it be that the lady Fulvia knows not what every member of the Grand Council knows,— that, for the love of the fair Magyar, Zuan Castello betrayed the secrets of the Venetian state, that, for the sweetness of her body, he bartered the plans of the Dalmatian fortresses that found their way straightway into the hands of the Ban?"

Fulvia was white as a corpse.

How much there was true, how much there was false in Strozzi's account, she could not determine in her present frame of mind, and it was upon that surmise he had acted,

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resolved to break a resistance which nothing else could break.

She was invaded by a great fear.

"How am I to believe you, perjured and forsworn, again and again?"

He could afford to bide his time.

"You have always found me consistent, Fulvia *mia*," Strozzi said in a conciliatory tone, inwardly rejoicing at the effect his tale seemed to have produced. "However, I am ready to adduce proof sufficient to convert an unbelieving Turk!"

"Your bribed menials?"

Her heart still resented the tale that was creeping to her brain.

"The Princess Yaga should be a competent witness."

Fulvia's eyes flashed fire. Her whole body was tense.

"Is the Magyar princess in Venice?"

"It is not proclaimed in the Piazza," Strozzi replied guardedly. "She does not enjoy the favor of the Three."

"Why did you not tell me this before?" she spoke with a touch of sadness in her voice.

A deprecatory gesture preceded Strozzi's reply.

"It was to spare you the pain of knowing the man you loved was utterly unworthy."

Fulvia began to emerge, as it were, out of the phases of a fevered dream. Her eyes became alert, though her manner did not change.

"This Magyar princess," she said dreamily, gazing at her own bare arms. "Is she so very beautiful?"

Strozzi stumbled blindly into the trap. "She rivals in beauty the Bela Reka, the white witch of Moldavia," he replied with fervor.

Fulvia continued to gaze at her hands.

"You have seen her?" she queried dreamily. Her eyes lay in ambush under the long, silken lashes.

"We met by chance."

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"This Magyar princess —" Fulvia continued, "what does she in Venice, the forbidden city?"

Strozzi gave a shrug.

"Perchance she has tired of her barbaric lover and longs for the freedom of the mask! What is troubling you, Fulvia *mia*?"

She gave a little laugh.

"I was wondering if I am as fair in your eyes as the mistress of the Ban, if these arms of mine are as white as those of this beautiful Magyar whom you so admire. I, too, intend stealing a look at my beautiful rival, the woman who took from me the man I love. I shall ask a question and I shall receive an answer!"

"That were hardly possible," Strozzi interposed with a start.

Fulvia regarded him with a puzzled look.

"Everything is possible."

"No Venetian may, with impunity, consort with the enemies of Venice."

"I shall see this beautiful Magyar. I shall ask a question, and I shall receive an answer."

Strozzi's perturbation was increasing.

"Fulvia," he stammered, struggling for utterance. "Consider your station, the woman's temper."

"Never fear!" she smiled. "I shall not yield to the white hands of the beautiful Magyar without a struggle. But now — leave me. I would be alone, to ponder over a tale that may bring about a great change in my life."

An evil light gleamed in Strozzi's eyes.

Had he prevailed indeed? Had he at last broken the will of the woman whom no consideration of promise or danger could bend to his purpose?

Leaping upon her suddenly he gripped the white supple wrists and, notwithstanding Fulvia's resistance, bent them back till she moaned with pain.

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She felt his hot breath upon her cheek, his lips upon her own.

With a supreme effort she wrested herself free and faced him with an expression of contempt and disdain in her eyes, that caused him involuntarily to recoil. He cowered as if under a blow.

"Now I begin to understand," she panted, her face white as death, her eyes searing flames of blue. "Fool that I was to give credence to your tale! Fool that I was to listen to your lies! I should have known the hand that struck in the dark! I should have known the spirit that did not quail before the foulest deed ever recorded in Hell!"

Strozzi staggered back, awed by her speech. There was an expression so sinister in his eyes that even Fulvia, intrepid as she was, felt a tremor in her heart.

He would reveal himself the master at last! He would crush this rebellious spirit! He would plunge this white soul into the lowest depths of misery and despair! Fear should henceforth be his ally. His grey mantle should enshroud her waking hours and her dreams. Fear for him whose memory the years had not been able to efface should freeze her brain, dry up the marrow in her bones, dwell with her forevermore, till madness drove tottering reason from her seat and the blank night of despair blotted out the last ray of hope.

For a moment they faced each other in a white silence.

At last he spoke, his brow dark as a thundercloud, his eyes two malignant pools of flame.

"I wished to spare you," he said, slowly, with an effort. "Since you defy me, you shall drain the poison goblet to the dregs. Your eyes, ever alert, saw true, Fulvia *mia*. Your fine lover has indeed, miraculously, arisen from the dead. Even the lagoon would have none of him. He has returned to Venice. Can you guess why, Fulvia *mia*?"

His mock-caressing tones roused all the hate she bore him in her woman's soul.

She stared at him, wide-eyed, trembling in every limb.

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It was true! Zuan lived! She could have shrieked it deliriously to the stars!

But — what was he about to say?

The baneful light in Strozzi's eyes caused her to dread the worst.

As she vouchsafed no reply to his innuendo, he sped the Parthian shaft.

"The Princess Yaga also is in Venice."

A cold hand seemed to clutch at Fulvia's heart.

"Do you see, Fulvia *mia*, you — whose eyes are ever so alert?"

With an effort she controlled herself.

"I must ask you to be plain, and brief."

"I shall be both," he replied with a mock courtesy. "Why, I ask you, fair lady, has the lord Castello vouchsafed no sign of life all these years to his disconsolate spouse? Ships arrive and depart; messengers come and go —"

Fulvia was trembling from head to foot.

What new web of lies was he about to spread? What new deceits was he about to spring?

Her lips tightly compressed, her white hands clenched, her eyes burning into his, she leaned forward as if about to leap at her tormentor.

But Strozzi was sure of his ground now.

"Why, I ask you, Fulvia *mia*, has no token of his love reached you, all these years, from him to whom you consecrated your beauty, your heart, your youth? Lucio Strozzi is no merciless gaoler. A beautiful and determined woman can receive a lover's message from the outside world, even within the walls of his castle. Nor is it for want of effort on your part, fairest lady, that you were not so favored. And Stiatta is not impervious to bribe."

He paused, enjoying her discomfiture.

"For the last time, my lord, I ask you, tell your tale and relieve me of your presence."

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He shrugged.

"Can it be that Yaga has lured him back to the old worship? That, stung by her white beauty, he has returned to the City of the Sea?"

There was a subdued fire in Fulvia's eyes.

"If I thought so, I should strangle this Magyar wanton with my own hands!"

He smiled his slow, corrosive smile.

"A harsh word from one beautiful and spirited woman to another. As I know the Magyar princess from report, she will leap to your challenge, Fulvia *mia*. What of your truant lover?"

The poison began to rankle in Fulvia's veins.

It did seem all too plausible. Zuan's miraculous return from the dead after a period of five years, his arrival on the heels of the beautiful Magyar, the utter absence of tidings, his apparent indifference to her own fate — God! Could such things be?

"Since you will not answer my question, I shall answer it for you, fairest lady," Strozzi continued slowly. "From this hour Zuan Castello is doomed. Twice he has trespassed on forbidden ground. This time I shall leave nothing to chance. But, ere he returns into the darkness whence he came, I shall whisper a word into his ear that shall cause him to curse the day he wooed Fulvia Zudeneghi to his nuptial bed."

Wide-eyed, trembling she stood before him. Then the fevered blood raced swiftly from the woman's cheeks, leaving them pale as death.

"Deem you he would believe your measureless lies?" she turned on him with all the disdain she could summon, yet strangely oppressed by her rising fear.

Again the baleful light shone in Strozzi's eyes.

"Your faith in him you loved is wavering even now. What-ever befall, I have spoken!"

Ere she realized the import of his speech the curtain had fallen behind his retreating form.

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Fulvia Zudeneghi was alone.

Tortured beyond endurance she stared into space.

Something in Strozzi's manner informed her he had spoken truth.

Zuan was in Venice, miraculously arisen from the dead. Their eyes had met in a flash of longing recognition.

The dread mystery, at whose dark portal she stood, began to oppress her as with the weight of a mountain.

A great weariness stole over her.

Her woman's reasoning entangled her in its subtle nets, till all her woman's wits could not extricate her from the labyrinth of doubt and fear.

The Magyar princess was in Venice, in open defiance of the degree of the Doge, and on her heels appeared her lover, the man she had mourned for dead, five long years!

Was it but a trick of chance?

One thing stood out clearly in the conflict that raged within her. From Zuan's own lips she must learn the truth, the solution of the mystery in the shadow of which she walked, the mystery that had baffled her waking hours and her dreams, beating upon her brain, like the intermittent drumming in the night-wrapt tropical forest, dulling her faculties, paralyzing her energies, sapping her strength.

How was she to bring about this meeting, she who dared confide in no one about her? Even her gondolier was bribed to report every word, every gesture, every sigh.

Suddenly it flashed upon her, like lightning in a starless night.

She had not set foot in the deserted house in the Sacca della Misericordia since that fateful night in the past. She could not bear the thought of revisiting the spot, where a bolt from the clear azure had shattered her happiness, her dream.

If Zuan's love was equal to her own, there he must seek the solution of the dread mystery that had wrecked his life. And there she must find him, or lose him again, forevermore.

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All the happiness and misery of the past rushed back upon her in one headlong torrent that almost swept her off her feet.

If all else failed, there was Yaga, the beautiful Magyar.

She, Fulvia, would ask a question and receive an answer.

CHAPTER VIII

A NIGHT OF TERROR



WHEN Zuan arrived in the Sacca della Misericordia he had broken every tie that bound him to the past. Yaga had thrown down the gauntlet. Venice could not hold them both.

Arrived at the water gate he paused, peering up and down the lane.

The Sacca was deserted. Not a sound broke the stillness. Where the lantern, high on the shrine of a Madonna, stung the gloom, nothing moved. In the shadows nothing stirred.

But something stirred within him — a warning voice.

What was afoot?

A strange foreboding oppressed him as he entered the garden. A slight breeze stirred in the branches, among the leaves, waking the silence with mysterious whisperings.

Zuan strove in vain to reassure himself. The sense of impending danger grew upon him. Only the dimming pulse of a distant oar disturbed the stillness.

The moon painted the flickering shadows of the leaves upon the greensward, spreading fantastic designs even to the door, through which he must enter.

Suddenly a new shadow added itself to the extreme edge of the moon's design. It was stationary, then lengthened imperceptibly.

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With a sibilant breath drawn between his lips, Zuan paused. His hand on the hilt of his dagger, he peered into the laurel arbor.

It seemed utterly deserted.

Only the moon played hide and seek with the shadows.

A clock, somewhere, struck the sixth hour of the night.

Heavy-hearted, Zuan groped for the lock. Mechanically he inserted the key, then turned, as if parting regretfully from the association of earth and sky, to set foot in a hostile domain.

Something had passed him.

Was it a shadow? Was it a breath? Was it his imagination?

With a shiver he stepped across the threshold of the gloom.

With a crash that reverberated in sinister echoes through the deserted house, the massive door crashed to behind him.

Like a somnambulist, a restless spirit revisiting the scenes of some former existence, he made his way upstairs to the chamber where he intended to spend the night.

Lighting a candle, he drew a chair up to the table which occupied the centre of the room and began to review the incidents of the evening. The sudden reaction, physical and mental, almost unfitted him for the mere process of thinking. His mind was in a whirl.

About him wove the mysteries of the night.

Intangible as the moon-mists, they mocked and defied him. Every clue he traced to its source failed to give up its secret. Strozzi had been invisible for days — in itself a rather disquieting circumstance. His efforts to learn the identity of the woman he had set eyes upon at the Frari had been mocked to scorn by a hostile fate. A strange fatality had led Yaga across his path.

He had burned his bridges. Once the poison sweetness of the fair Magyar crept to his brain, clouding his reason, swaying his purpose, he knew himself for doomed. There were greater things at stake than his life and happiness. Venice, herself,

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lay at the mercy of the sorceress, who crushed in her white hands the panting souls of men.

In some strange manner his own destiny was bound up with that of the City of the Sea, and here, in this very abode, here, among these haunting shadows, lay the core of the mystery.

Something was hidden within these silent precincts, which some one desired or guarded.

What lay beyond the door through which Fulvia had passed out of his life?

All the love he had borne her flooded back upon him in these moments of anguish. The uncertainty of her fate almost ground his spirit to atoms. Somehow Strozzi's words lacked conviction. Even the testimony of the sexton of San Michelé would not set his soul at rest.

Did not a stone proclaim his own demise?

Nature at last asserted her claims. The tired brain refused to answer his further questionings. Extinguishing the light and stretching himself on a couch Zuan was wrapt in the arms of sleep.

He suddenly started with a choked cry and a sharp pain at his throat, where some horrible presence was strangling the life out of him. He heard himself give forth a muffled, gurgling groan, while tearing at the devilish grip around his neck. With a violent effort he jerked himself free. The fingers at his throat loosened their grip. He struck out wildly, fiercely, in the darkness. His arms met but empty air.

Bathed in cold perspiration, Zuan raised himself on his elbows. Panting and breathless, anticipating another attack, he crouched by the bed. All was silent in the darkness. He heard neither sound nor movement, either inside the chamber or without.

Cautiously he put out a hand, groped for his flints and ignited the torch.

The chamber held no occupant, save himself. But for the pain caused by the grip on his throat, it might have been an

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evil dream. Zuan realized he had just waked in time. Another moment, and life would have been extinct forever.

He watched, crouching and waiting, intent upon the faintest indication of the presence of his assailant. He remembered locking every door as he entered. The windows, thirty feet above the canal, could not admit any one bent upon mischief.

Again he thought he heard, as on his first visit to the house, a muffled footfall outside the chamber door.

Zuan felt his courage revive. He had himself in hand once again. He set himself the task of finding his enemy. From chamber to chamber he walked. It was a strange and weird experience, searching room after room in the night, with no light save the torch, expecting every moment to find himself locked with some invisible opponent in a wild fight for life.

Now and then he paused, standing breathless in the dark shadows, straining to hear some sound to guide him where his assailant lurked.

How he had entered and departed, he could not imagine. He descended into the vault. The assault gave him back his self-assurance. It was to be a fight to the death with the unseen power that menaced his existence.

The door which held the mystery of his life opposed an unsurmountable barrier to his farther advance.

Returning to the chamber above, Zuan began to sound the floor for hidden trap doors, for the grim thought obsessed his mind that, had the assassin succeeded, his body would have been consigned to the canal.

He was, by this time, keyed up to an unusual pitch of keenness. Nevertheless he could not rid himself of the sensation that an invisible presence was lurking and watching.

Zuan discovered nothing to throw any light upon the assault, neither footprints, nor marks of any other kind.

He heard the bells of a distant cloister chime the hour. The grey dawn was creeping over the sky, and the dun shadows of night fled into their dismal recesses.

CHAPTER IX

THE PRINCESS YAGA



THE sun had gone down in angry crimson that ate like fire through the sullen heart of the clouds, banked low and heavy on the western horizon. It presaged a hot and breathless night, when thunder muttered distantly and vague lightnings played hide and seek among the clouds.

In a lofty chamber of the old Lombard pile, occupied by the Magyar princess, dusky and silent and remote from the pulse of life, floored with exquisite tilings and hung with sombre, silken tapestries that exhaled the faint perfume of the mysterious East, Yaga was reclining among the cushions of a sumptuous ottoman. The exotic hues of her surroundings enhanced the gleaming whiteness of her throat that rose like an alabaster shaft from the graceful nape of the neck and of her wonderful, statuesque arms. The heavy coils of amber hair, in which the sun seemed to have lost his rays, were tied in a Grecian knot. Now and then one white hand extricated itself from its resting place under her head, to brush aside a strand of silken hair.

The chamber, high, vaulted, with tall lancet windows that looked out upon the stagnant tide of a lugubrious canal, was appointed with a magnificence truly eastern. Gorgeous flowers in great jars of jasper added to the bewildering oriental coloring that trapped the senses and left them prostrate before its onslaught.

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A perfumed lamp of wrought bronze was suspended from the high, vaulted ceiling. In its subdued light the reclining form on the ottoman appeared like the marble statue of some pagan divinity in repose.

A silver jar of incense, smouldering before a barbaric eastern ikon, tinged the air with faint, insidious fragrance that crept to the brain and played havoc with the senses.

The air outside became more heated and oppressive every moment. The storm that was moving down upon the City of the Sea was drawing ever nearer.

Yaga was pondering on the events of the hours that had gone to their grave.

By a trick of chance she had again crossed the path of him who had spurned her for another, the man who had miraculously returned from the dead.

Resolved to win him back she had lost him again. She did not deceive herself regarding her own defeat.

Yaga's arms were tense as she stared unseeing into space.

She seemed to listen anew to Zuan's words of disdain, as he consigned her, a second time, to oblivion. She was conscious of her beauty, of her strength, of her invincible youth, of all the wild impulses that slept in the depths of her soul. She seemed to see him again in the fury of her desire, his very presence seemed to isolate her from the ordinary atmosphere, wrap her, as it were, in inflamed ether. All had been in vain!

In Zuan's eyes she was a poisoned and corrupt thing, laden with many loves, a wandering, implacable temptress.

Her body seemed to contract as if under a spasm, as she considered her humiliation, her defeat. The irrevocable word had been spoken, and, as if in a last agony, the whole of her past stormy life rose up before her, a life of pain and struggle, of bewilderment, passion and triumph. Henceforth all was lost, devastated at one blow the beautiful domain that had become the prey of vindictive rebel slaves.

Be it so! She would accept the inevitable. Henceforth

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they must meet as enemies. But, to his dying hour Zuan should rue the day when he had spurned her love the second time.

She possessed power, and power she craved to carry out her designs. Zuan had spurned her for Fulvia of the Zudeneghi — Fulvia of the green isle of Arbé.

It would be the death-blow to Venice, the death-blow to the old half-blind Doge, Giovanni Gradenigo, the death-blow to her hated rival, Fulvia of the Zudeneghi, whose ancestral home would be sacked and defiled by the Ban's mongrel hordes.

Zuan had returned!

He had returned to seek, not herself, but the woman he loved, Fulvia, — Fulvia of the green isle of Arbé. The thought ate into her brain.

How that name, proud as her own, stung her pride!

Fulvia of the Zudeneghi! Her rival in beauty, in spirit, in all that makes woman dear to man, — her virtuous rival.

Yaga had heard report of the woman's wondrous beauty, a beauty that challenged her own.

The wild, untamed beast within her, that recognized no law, crouched and bounded and leaped up with a savage cry.

After a time it crept into its lair before the return of saner reason.

She must bide her time, curb her desires, if she would conquer in the end. Her proud spirit chafed under the thought of defeat. She must be wary! Thus only would her vengeance be complete.

Extending one white arm Yaga struck a gong.

In the curtained door, in response to the summons, there appeared a beautiful Eurasian girl, tall, slender, willowy, with red lips and wicked eyes.

"Has the lord Strozzi arrived?"

"He waits in the antechamber."

"Conduct him hither."

A few moments later Lucio Strozzi, having divested himself

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of his mask and mantle, stood in the presence of the Magyar princess. The Eurasian had withdrawn.

Bending low, Strozzi raised Yaga's hand to his lips, then took a seat a few paces from the woman.

"Your abode, Princess," he stammered, bewildered by the woman's beauty, "is, I hope, to your liking?"

"You have been most considerate of my comfort, my lord Strozzi," Yaga replied, with a smile. "I am so safely lodged, hardly the devil can find me here."

Strozzi raised a warning finger.

"Walls have ears in Venice, Princess."

"Even in this mausoleum, inhabited by a score or more of flimsy phantoms?"

"Better the phantoms of the dead than the phantoms of the living," Strozzi replied cryptically, devouring with his eyes the beautiful apparition before him. "Really I do not recognize myself in your presence, Princess," he continued, taking courage from his own innuendo. "Nothing, nor any one in Venice, could prevail upon me to appear unmasked, even for a moment."

"Are we not friends? At least, dare I not hope so?" Yaga turned to him with her tantalizing smile.

"Friends, indeed!" he replied with warmth. "My feelings towards yourself, Princess, might even justify a higher term."

"What is there higher than friendship, true and proved?" Yaga replied tantalizingly, pretending not to note his innuendo.

Strozzi raised Yaga's hand to his lips, winning a smile from the face in the cushions.

"Beware, my lord Strozzi," she said, speeding a random shaft. "Some one in your palace will be jealous."

He gave a shrug, but made no reply.

"Ah! It is true then! At times every woman is pleasing to man save his own wife," she laughed, stretching herself luxuriously. Yaga loved to admire her own white arms, and

in her face there was an insolence that was wholly poetic.

"Are you of those, my lord Strozzi?"

"Princess, you are divine!" he replied, ignoring her question.

Yaga's breathing seemed to quicken.

"I fear you flatter," she said, with a smile, that revealed her white teeth.

"You are beautiful."

She shrugged.

"I love life — the pomp, the pride, the glory of it all! But," she continued dreamily, "I also know that there are things difficult to achieve, and possession often kills the illusion of desire."

"I, too, have witnessed to this truth," Strozzi replied, restlessly.

"What can I give to you?"

Strozzi started at the directness of her question.

"Quench, then, the thirst that consumes my soul!" he cried, bending forward and drinking in the mysterious light of those green, inscrutable eyes.

"You are mad!" she interposed with feigned surprise.

"What of the Countess Strozzi, your wife?"

"It is of her I would speak," he replied with a sudden access of passion. "She is the lodestone of my destiny."

Yaga's quick eyes scanned the pallid face of the man.

"You do not love her then?"

"She requites my love with hate."

"Why not retaliate in kind?"

"Between us stands a phantom of the past."

"Do you come to me to exorcise this spectre?" she laughed.

"It may be given to you to do so, Princess. So at least Donna Fulvia believes."

Yaga leaped to her feet, her face white as lightning.

"Are there in Venice two women of that name?"

He regarded her curiously.

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"There may be, for aught I know."

"I know of but one," Yaga flashed. "Fulvia of the Zudeneghi."

"It is of her, I speak."

For a moment Yaga regarded the speaker with an expression of wild wonder in her eyes.

"The wife of Zuan Castello?" she turned to him slowly, her sinuous body bending forward like a reed in the storm.

"The wife of Lucio Strozzi," the man replied darkly. "It is a long story and has no bearing on the present hour."

A shrill laugh came from Yaga's lips.

"Who knows? Has the hour then pealed that shall bring to me fulfillment of my desire? Fulvia of the Zudeneghi lives —"

A sardonic smile curved Strozzi's lips.

"She lives — in memory!"

Yaga flashed upon him, her body tense.

"I am in no mood for riddles."

"My wife — yet not my wife —"

"Of her own choice?"

"Of her own choice — yet not her choice!"

"And he?"

"Mourns her as dead."

"She knows the truth?"

"Memory is stronger than hope."

"How I hate her!" Yaga flashed.

He regarded her with a puzzled smile.

"She cannot harm you now."

"I hate her for being a martyr, for being young and strong and beautiful. And she is beautiful?"

Strozzi's eyes met those of the woman.

"I thought so, until I set eyes upon yourself, Princess."

"I hate her," Yaga flashed into his utterance. "She insults me because of her misery, because she is content to suffer. It is impossible to vanquish such a woman, physically or otherwise."

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Strozzi shrugged, with a queer laugh.

"What is impossible to the beautiful Yaga?"

"Is Donna Fulvia aware of her lover's miraculous resurrection?"

"By some trick of chance their eyes met at the Frari, during the harangue of the monk from Rome. The crowds kept them apart. Now Castello is determined to find his lost love. And the woman — need I say more?"

"From all accounts you proved a devoted friend."

Strozzi squirmed.

"I wooed and won."

"Knowing Zuan lived —"

"Only a miracle saved him from his doom."

"A doom — prepared by you!"

The thin lips straightened.

"You flatter me, Princess. My power is not so vast."

"His accuser did not face him when his doom was pronounced."

"Such are our laws."

"Your laws are like yourselves."

"Bold words, Princess."

She snapped her fingers in his face.

"This for your cowardly tribunal that strikes in the dark!"

Strozzi leaped to his feet.

"Silence, Princess! I dare not listen to such words. Your safe-conduct —"

"Signed by the lord Strozzi —"

"It is well you remind me!"

Yaga gave a dark smile.

"I, too, am not likely to forget. You were Castello's friend."

"Friend, as friends are."

"Were you assured of Zuan's guilt?"

"I saw no cause for doubt."

She regarded him quizzically.

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"Is it known to you, my lord Strozzi, that at one time I loved this man whom you destroyed?"

"You are mad, Princess! I had no hand in this!"

Yaga's eyes burnt into the speaker's face.

"You are evading my question."

"Then it is the truth?"

"What is the truth?" she flashed.

"A certain tale that came to our shores from Ragusa."

Yaga shrugged.

"Perchance it is the truth! And now, my lord Strozzi, to the core of the matter. What will you do? You require my assistance in some matter close to your heart. I require your good offices in another."

Strozzi squirmed.

"Two things are imperative. The man must be persuaded the woman he saw at the Frari was not Donna Fulvia. The woman herself must disappear."

Yaga gave a nod of understanding.

"And how will you accomplish this wondrous feat, my lord Strozzi?"

"Let the 'how' be my affair, Princess. If I have spared him until now, it is but to lull him into greater security, ere I send him to his doom."

She struck down his uplifted hand.

"If you but touch one hair of him, my lord Strozzi, I shall know how to avenge his death even if the murkiest midnight shrouded the foul deed. Beware, my lord! This man is mine!"

Strozzi's fingers played nervously with the hilt of the dagger which dangled at his side.

"If his life means so much to you whose love he has spurned, Princess" — he spurted viciously, but she cut into his utterance.

"I am able to avenge my own wrongs, and in my own way! As for you, my lord Strozzi, beware lest the house you have built tumble down upon your own head."

"Since you desire it, Princess."

"I command it!"

"A serious blow to my plans."

"What are your plans to me, my lord Strozzi? This man is mine. I propose to deal with him as I shall see fit. What of the woman?"

Ere Yaga could prevent, Strozzi was on his knees before her, covering her hands, her arms, her feet, with burning kisses. For a moment she seemed tempted to administer a fitting rebuke for his daring, then a strange, veiled look crept into her eyes as she listened to his pleading, his outburst of passion. Her face, white, beautiful, inscrutable as the sphinx lent no suspicion of her thoughts.

"A fair exchange, Princess," Strozzi concluded, exhausted by the vehemence of his own emotions, "a carnival jest whereof they shall speak in all times to come; a triumph for the most beautiful woman on earth — a fit reward for her devoted slave, who has risked his life to obey her slightest whim."

A tremor passed through Yaga's body at the fevered touch of the man, who was grovelling before her, lust-bitten, the vessel of his own devouring passions, vainly groping for utterance, pouring his tainted confessions into her reluctant ear. Her long lashes veiled the expression of her eyes.

At last she rose abruptly and shook herself free of him.

Standing before him tense, beautiful, in all her marvelous loveliness, she said:

"So be it, my lord Strozzi! A carnival jest. The Ban will rejoice, and my mission shall not have been in vain!"

Bending low, Strozzi raised Yaga's white hand to his lips.

"Princess, you make me the happiest of men."

Again the veiled look crept into Yaga's eyes.

"I shall await your report, my lord Strozzi. Meanwhile — remember our compact!"

Strozzi reeled from the chamber, like a drunken man.



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Yaga's eyes followed his receding form with the expression of the sphinx of the desert.

Outside, thunder, lightning and rain, lashed by the storm, enveloped the City of the Sea in the sable mantle of darkness, and the peals of distant convent bells sounded forlorn through the nocturnal murk.

CHAPTER X

ON THE BROGLIO



THE following evening found Zuan earlier than usual on the Piazza of San Marco.

The great square was again filled with a motley throng assembled in the privileged security of the mask. Melody and music were rife on the waters. Gondolas with their cargoes of flowers, loveliness and intrigue

were gliding over the shadowy canals.

The Piazza and the Piazzetta were brilliant with lights. The Old Procuratie and the gorgeous palace of the Doge seemed jets of living flame. Every curve and volute, every column, architrave, plinth and pillar, were defined in myriads of tiny globes, whose flames wavered in the fitful puffs of the sirocco.

Nobles in silk and satin mingled with the fishermen of the lagunes. Natives of all the coasts and islands that acknowledged the sway of Venice, Greeks from the Morea, Tartars from the Crimea, Smyrniotes, dwellers of the Ionian Isles and the Greek Archipelago, venders of flowers and fruits from the mainland, thronged the smooth marble pavements.

The events of the past days had crowded in upon Zuan with so great a swiftness, that he had not regained his mental bearings. Everything within him, his very soul, seemed in a state of ferment.

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The circle was narrowing day by day. Yet not the faintest gleam pierced the nocturnal horizon of the past.

The full moon was rising behind San Giorgio Maggiore, spreading a path of liquid silver over the lagune. Black boats, with the glowworm lamps on their prow, darted hither and thither.

Ascending the cloudless sky, the planet of night silvered the domes of the city, pouring vitreous sheen on the red lights of the Piazzetta, flooding the canals, piercing the murky labyrinth of Rio linked with Rio, raising her Aladdin's lamp to the star world above and summoning mystic shadows into being. The lagune scintillated with the reflection of a thousand colored lanterns that swayed softly to and fro in the balmy air of the vernal night.

Zuan penetrated the arcades with a poignant sense of irritation, until he found himself near the Ponte della Paglia, which spans the narrow canal between the ducal palace and the prisons.

There it was silent. Only the dark waters lapped round the massive pillars and iron-barred windows of the majestic Rio façades.

Not a sound broke the stillness, save the hum of distant voices, or the occasional splash of an oar, as a solitary gondola came stealing along between the blackened walls, discharged its occupant and vanished in the night.

Zuan stood in the very heart of Venetian intrigue.

The Broglio was filled with masks and idlers. A halberdier paced the open gallery at the head of the Giants' Stairs and, now and then, the footfall of other sentinels might be heard echoing amid the ponderous arches.

Ere he passed out from beneath the arch, two or three masks appeared at the opposite entrance of the court where they paused as if struck with the melancholy grandeur of the scene, before they mingled once more with the throngs that trifled in the immediate proximity of that secret and

ruthless tribunal, as man will riot on the brink of a volcano.

Leaning against one of the pillars, Zuan watched the coming and going of the masks. They arrived singly and in groups, but did not linger within the shadowy precincts.

Now a shadow glided into the court from the direction of the canal, and advanced stealthily towards the foot of the Giants' Stairs.

Just then three taps resounded on the marble pavement and, ere their echoes had died to silence, Zuan found himself accosted by the masked stranger.

"San Marco and San Teodoro have you in mind," spoke a hushed voice. "If I mistake not, you are he I am sent to meet."

"That may be — or not," Zuan replied indifferently. "Give me the sign or unmask, that I may know if you are the one I await."

A negative gesture came in response.

"By your good leave, worthy sir, I, too, should prefer to keep off the night air with this scrap of satin."

"According to your pleasure!" Zuan shrugged and started to walk away.

A detaining hand was laid upon his arm.

"I commend your prudence, my lord. Nevertheless — since it is I who am risking all, if you are the one I seek, you know the word."

"I have no time to trifle," Zuan replied with feigned impatience, turning as if to quit the spot. "Return to your master and tell him to send one possessed of keener judgment. A pleasant night to you — and happy dreams!"

Again the detaining grip fastened itself upon his arm.

"Nay, my lord, you are far too quick for one of my poor wits. That of which I am the bearer waits but the identity of him I seek to be placed in his hands."

"Am I to disrobe for your pleasure on the Piazza?"

"Your pardon, my lord. I have but one head and would

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look ill sitting without it between the granite pillars. Besides, how do I know you are not the Leopard Prince?"

A jarring laugh preceded Zuan's reply.

"What business have you with him?"

"None that I should like to transact either here or in the scarlet chamber," the man replied under his breath.

"I, too, owe him a grudge!"

Zuan's interlocutor shook his head doggedly.

"Nevertheless I must have the word, my lord. It were all my life is worth to place what I carry in the hands of one who might bring my head on the block."

Zuan gave a shrug.

"Better heads than yours, my friend, have fallen ere now and will again," he replied with a show of irritation. "Nevertheless, I commend your caution. Recommend me to your master and say to him, the hour will find the man."

No sooner had Zuan concluded his speech than a scroll was thrust into his hand, and he found himself standing alone in the shadows of the Broglio.

Just then the mysterious signal was repeated. Even the halberdier at the head of the Giants' Stairs paused and listened, ere he resumed his monotonous perambulation. What had he to do with lovers' signals and the like?

Now a mask rushed into the dimly lighted court from the direction of the canal, paused, peered right and left into the shadows and, seeing no one, disappeared in the direction of the quay.

Zuan retired towards the arch by the water gate, hoping to gain a glimpse of him who had responded to the second signal.

He was doomed to disappointment and, after assuring himself that no one was near, he cut the cord that confined the message.

The parchment was blank.

"It is as dangerous to know too much as to know too little," he muttered grimly, placing the message in his doublet.

A few moments later he stood in the Piazza of San Marco.

Zuan was too well instructed in Venetian intrigue not to know that a secret such as he carried on his person, whatever its import, was its own death warrant, if discovered on the one for whom it was not intended.

He was not, however, permitted to reason out the mystery, for he was forthwith beset by masks and fantastic shapes, who swarmed about, challenged and mocked him. Here the boisterous salute of a clown broke the train of his meditations, there he found himself under the necessity of repelling the somewhat too ardent advances of a disguised gypsy.

The moon was mounting to her zenith.

In broad flakes of silver her ghostly light fell upon the palace fronts, the low Asiatic domes and volutes of the Basilica of San Marco. Against her pallid disk the domes and the Campanile of San Giorgio Maggiore stood out in a halo of glory. The large reach of the lagoon was all moon-silvered. The island churches were domed with moon-irradiated pearl.

Zuan's brow was dark as a thundercloud.

Even now some devils' carnival was brewing in Venice.

Something was afoot that evaded him as an eerie phantom.

Approaching the water-stairs of the Piazzetta, he gave the accustomed signal.

A gondola drew up.

Entering the *felzê* he gave the direction.

The gondola glided among the pleasure barges, eventually emancipated itself from the various shipping and pursued its course over the shimmering expanse.

The misty sky with its clouds and stellar spaces was drenched in ghostly moonlight. Not a breeze stirred. The moon sailed clear of the straggling cloud whips. Here and there an irregular patch of light lay silvered on the rippling tide. A grey watchtower stood dreaming in the night.

A small, dark spot loomed up on the horizon.

It approached and grew imperceptibly.

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The oar of Zuan's gondolier dashed the foam behind, as his boat sped over the oily surface of the water.

The dark spot shortly assumed the shape of a boat at anchor.

Now from the direction of the town there came a gondola.

It issued from one of the remoter water lanes of Venice, gliding upon the tranquil bosom of the bay, silently as the fancied progress of a spirit. A practiced arm directed its movement, which was sure and swift, so swift indeed as to denote pressing haste on the part of its occupant. It took the direction of the Adriatic, steering between one of the more southerly outlets of the bay and the Isle of San Giorgio.

For some time the efforts of the gondolier continued unrelaxed, though his eye was often cast behind him, as if he feared pursuit. Suddenly changing their course, both craft shot away at top speed and were lost to sight.

"Did you note the gondola that entered the Giudecca Canal?" Zuan turned to the gondolier.

"That was no Venetian craft, my lord," the gondolier returned. "It was a covered gondola, such as ply between the Arbesian canals."

Zuan gave a start. The gondolier had but voiced his own suspicions.

"And what of the gondola that came from town?"

"It belongs to the lord Strozzi. I know the gondolier, a surly fellow from the mountains, though talkative enough over the wine cup."

Zuan, with a nod, gave orders to return to the city.

The bells from the churches and convents of Venice had long pealed the midnight hour when he arrived in the Sacca della Misericordia.

In the solitude of his chamber he minutely scrutinized the strange message, which had so mysteriously come to him, by the light of a torch.

Subjecting the parchment to every known test, he finally held it against the flickering candle light.

Slowly, coaxed by the flame, character after character began to creep out of nothingness.

His eyes devoured the words as they slowly formed themselves on the surface of the parchment.

Did he at last hold the key to the mystery?

CHAPTER XI

THE CORPSE LIGHTS OF SAN MICHÉLÉ



THE day was fading. A fiery sunset flamed itself to death behind the purple crests of the Euganean Hills when Zuan summoned a gondola, gave the direction, and shortly was out on the broad bosom of the lagune.

With a heaviness of heart such as he had rarely experienced, he pondered on the business of the night. Notwithstanding the seemingly irrefutable testimony of his eyes he was more than ever convinced that he was at the mercy of some fiendish hallucination, that would eventually destroy his mind and leave him, a mental derelict, floating helplessly upon the tide of life.

To-night was to place the seal upon his doubts forevermore.

The breeze grew fainter and at last died altogether as the evening wore on. In the east, above the hills of Friuli, heavy cloud masses were banked, presaging a storm. Already distant lightnings flickered and illumined, like a giant alabaster vase, the wizard domes of white-cloud masonry, that rose above the Dolomites of Cadore.

The slanting rays of the westering sun still touched the red brick campanile of Malamocco. Far to eastward the eye faintly discerned the dim outlines of the Istrian coast, fading into the horizon. Then the last lights of the sun died in the west and darkness stole silently over the waters.

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Flocks of many-tinted fishing boats, red, orange, lemon, swam past the gondola, moving through the mystery of the sunset. White-sailed ships, like sheeted phantoms, glided through the silent twilight. Low lines of long, shallow islands, broken here and there by a shadowy campanile, or tufted with cypresses, flitted past and vanished in the dusk.

Profound silence reigned. Only the sea was thundering upon the sandy barrier of the Lido.

Yonder lay San Lazzaro, with the whitewashed walls of the Armenian Cloister. The red brick tower of San Servolo rose like a ruddy giant above the sandy shore. Thin bell notes quivered, like a lost prayer, through the deepening dusk.

The gondolier, as if divining Zuan's thoughts, rowed with increased vigor.

The Fondacco dei Mori melted away like marvelously discolored ivory, like the surviving portico of a ruined mosque. The far towers of Madonna dell' Orto, Sa' Andrea and San Giobbe passed them like phantoms in the night. A brown church and a squat watchtower prayed silently to the stars.

They passed a belated *braghozzo* from Chioggia, like a lonely ghost in the night. The black sail flapped idly against the mast, haughty as an old republican banner, bearing the emblem of the Lion and the Book.

The gondola plunged to northward into the deserted water lanes, where the Laguna Morta traced its abandoned shores against the phantasmal shadows of the night.

At last an island, surrounded by white walls, hove into sight, — San Michélé, the Island of the Dead.

There was something unspeakably sinister about the cemetery, where the dead lie buried in the ooze of the lagune. But even at that remote period there existed a few mausolea, erected for the wealthier nobility, ere, in time, the custom of burying the dead above ground, became more universal.

Death seemed to have filled that place from all time.

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A dread foreboding began to haunt Zuan, as the gondolier, with a back stroke of his oar, drove the gondola ashore.

A voiceless warning urged him to return. A panic came fluttering about his heart, the dread of entering the resting place of the dead, perchance to find what he dreaded most of all things on earth.

The terror proved almost too great.

As he turned to the gondolier he gave a start.

His Charon wore a mask.

It was not the custom in Venice for gondoliers to go masked. In his mental abstraction he had not noted the sinister circumstance.

But he saw something else.

There was an expression in the gondolier's eyes that gave him pause. It might have been wonder, curiosity, fear.

Zuan's anger gaining the upper hand, he addressed the gondolier.

"How now, fellow, what means this mummary? Know you there is a law in Venice, that no gondolier may wear a mask? Let me see your face, ere you receive your dues!"

The gondolier's demeanor was one of cringing servility.

Nevertheless Zuan thought or imagined that there lurked a note of irony in his speech which gave the lie to his deferential air.

"Your pardon, my lord," he replied, "I do not wear this mask to keep off the salt air, nor to save my complexion, like one of your fine ladies, but because I have registered a vow to San Nicolo."

"A vow!" Zuan replied sternly, eager to dismiss the fellow yet hesitating as, by so doing, he would deprive himself of the only means of returning to Venice. He could hardly hope to hail some passing craft in the night, and the intermittent rumbling of thunder heralded the approaching storm. "And what, if I may be so bold to ask, is the object of that vow?"

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"It concerns a lady, my lord," replied the gondolier humbly. "I am sure your lordship will spare me the details."

Zuan regarded the boatman fixedly, then he dismissed a rising suspicion as absurd and disturbing.

"Await my return here," he turned to him with an asperity of manner which seemed to impress the gondolier and, as a further security to himself, he withheld the fare. "I shall return within the hour."

To his great surprise the gondolier began to show some concern.

"Is your lordship also mourning some dear departed one?" he queried with some hesitancy.

An affirmative reply seemed to encourage the gondolier to proceed.

"And you will spend an hour among the graves of the dead — alone — unattended, my lord?"

Voicing, as he did, his own misgivings, Zuan gave a start.

"The dead, my friend, are less to be dreaded than the living," he interposed. "I shall not come to harm at their hands, at least."

The gondolier bowed in silence and prepared to stretch himself on the poop of his gondola. Then, with a glance at the higher risen cloud bank, palpitating with lightnings, he bade his lordship Godspeed and Zuan crossed the short distance from the landing to the gate.

Here he paused for a moment irresolute, ere he entered the burial ground. Abandoning his intention to rouse the sexton, restrained by an uncontrollable reluctance from revealing the purpose of his presence, he followed the winding path, which lost itself in the shadows of the elms and willows. The black cypresses loomed darkly above him. There was a faint rustling in their leaves as if they whispered to each other a secret, known to them alone.

Now only, as deeper and deeper he penetrated the nocturnal gloom, did the daring of the venture flash upon Zuan's

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mind. It was so dark in the cemetery that even one familiar with its windings would have lost himself among the shrubbery and the tangled growth of the underbrush which somewhat relieved the natural sterility of the ground.

With a mingled sense of dread and apprehension Zuan groped his way beneath the shadow of the overhanging branches. Only the sheen of the lightnings fitfully illumined his path, revealing, here and there, a white mausoleum, surrounded by old, moss-covered headstones, bending as if under the weight of their years. Now and then was to be heard the ominous rumbling of thunder, as the storm drew nearer. Its voice seemed as a protest against his intrusion upon the peace of the dead.

Deeper and deeper Zuan invaded the abode of Death.

A blinding flash of lightning was followed by a crashing peal of thunder. It roused him, chilled and unnerved, from the growing lethargy of his senses.

At the intersection of two paths he thought he saw something resembling a white column, floating between the yew trees. It vanished, then reappeared, a spectral form, moving towards a distant mausoleum.

A chill as of death gripped Zuan as his gaze followed the phantom, unable to shut out the apparition. He felt his heart sink within him. Never did the tombs look so white and ghostly. Never did tree and grass rustle and wave so ominously. Never did the screech owl send such woeful presage through the night.

Now he saw the apparition flit down an avenue of yew trees, when it suddenly stopped and turned. A flash of lightning from the driving cloud bank revealed, in startling silhouette, a dark-haired woman, shrouded in the cerements of the grave. The features remained hazy, indistinct. The ensemble was that of Fulvia.

He shrieked her name. The echoes of his voice were drowned by an appalling crash of thunder, that pealed down the lost islands of the lagunes.

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She seemed to beckon to him. A voice called his name, a voice deadly sweet, that vibrated through his brain, as the cry from the hill, where Venus assembles her lovers.

As one under a spell he obeyed the call. Stumbling over the grave mounds he came towards her, and the apparition seemed to await his coming.

When within twenty paces of her, she suddenly turned, taking the direction of the mausoleum, that rose at some distance into the night.

As one dazed he looked about. The wind had begun to rise and was moaning through the trees. The darkness was so dense that he could not discern the nearest objects, and the lightnings, though more and more frequent, seemed to plunge the shuddering world into ever denser gloom.

Summoning all his courage Zuan staggered after the phantom, which had entered a mausoleum of more than common pretensions.

The gates of the burial vault stood ajar.

For a moment he paused, restrained by the icy grip of the King of Fear.

Then, impelled by something he could not resist, he entered the sepulchre and paused, as if rooted to the spot.

In the background of the mausoleum which was wrapt in Stygian gloom, there appeared a pale green light, resembling a sulphureous haze, such as is visible at night over swamps and morasses, where dead men's bones lie rotting.

It grew, intensified, lighting up the vault as with a supernatural glow. The walls seemed to recede in the darkness, and drear shadows drooped under the high, vaulted ceiling.

And now, in this ghost light, there appeared, equally shadowy and elusive, the phantom shape that had lured him on, swathed in the cerements of the grave. Her shadowy arms extended towards him, seemed to beckon him on, and the eyes, full of an unspoken dread, held his own with their deadly spell.

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Zuan's reason tottered at the sight of the apparition, in whose tormented face he traced the resemblance to one who had gone from him forever.

With an inarticulate outcry he staggered towards the phantom. The green mist began to sway, as if fanned by a breath. Slowly it started to recede and the phantasm it enveloped grew fainter and fainter.

But now Zuan was drawn on by a force no longer to be resisted.

Though Death itself lurked in the darkness, though his soul writhed with the dread of the unknown, there was no staying him. Following in the wake of the receding haze, he came to a flight of marble stairs leading into the crypts below. The corpse-light grew fainter as it floated before him through the gloom. Once only, ere it died, it grew to a terrible brightness, but the phantom had vanished and Zuan found himself alone in the ghostly, sepulchral gloom.

At the foot of the stairs he paused. The sound of his steps on the stone flags seemed to wake a thousand eerie echoes.

Was he going mad? Had some fiend painted on his brain the wraith of the woman of his dreams?

How long he stood there, he knew not, when he caught his breath hard.

Above him, in the mausoleum, he heard a sound as of bare feet bestriding wet flags.

Some one had entered from without.

Perchance the cemetery held another visitor, who was driven to shelter from the raging tempest into these ghostly precincts.

Taut and tense he listened.

Some one came creeping down the marble stairs.

No chance visitor would invade the crypts!

Zuan groped his way along the smooth surface of the marble wall, till he came to an angle at some distance from the stairs, where, expectant, he crouched in the nocturnal murk. His

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fingers clutched the hilt of his poniard, his eyes tried to pierce the gloom, to fix the approaching horror.

It came, slowly, stealthily, with the noiseless gait of the puma. He could not see it, but every fibre of his being was strung taut under the influence of the unseen, terrible presence.

Now, for a brief moment, the spectral haze reappeared.

Its pallid sheen framed a shadow, lithe and sinister, that came creeping along the wall where Zuan cowered, watching the thing's approach with a horror too great for utterance.

But he had reached the acme of what the human brain may endure. Something seemed suddenly to snap within him, and he shouted with all his might, waking the dismal echoes of the vaults. The greenish haze vanished. The shadow melted into the night, but the murk was instantly rent by a flash. Something struck the smooth surface of the wall behind him, less than three inches from his head, snapped and dropped with a sharp, metallic ring.

A flying shape was racing up the stairs through the gloom. What was he to do?

If he attempted to quit this abode of death, he would doubtlessly meet this nocturnal thing in the shadows of the sepulchre, where every advantage was with his adversary. If he remained, he must face the horror anew, for he was assured, whoever it was, he would return to see his purpose accomplished.

Carefully he groped for the weapon which had been hurled with almost fateful accuracy.

His hand came in contact with a steely point, sharp as a needle. It was a poniard of more than ordinary length.

Come what might, he could support the strain no longer. Whatever horror lurked within these walls, he would quit this charnel house.

Groping his way through the gloom, he arrived at the foot of the stairs.

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About him was impenetrable darkness.

Keeping close to the wall, Zuan slowly began to ascend, when, midway, he came in contact with something that came creeping back below.

Impelled by the dread of the moment, he struck.

A savage snarl informed him that the blow had gone home.

A dull thud fell upon his ear as the shadowy thing rolled down to its doom, then, with the scream of a maddened beast, lay still.

Zuan gained the door of the sepulchre with a bound.

The rain had ceased. The thunderclouds had rolled to westward.

A late moon was rising through the nocturnal haze.

Almost breathless Zuan arrived at the gates and, quitting the dismal, haunted confines of San Michélé, entered the *felzé* of the waiting gondola.

The gondolier arose sleepily, stretched his limbs, and dipped his oar. New shivers thrilled the keel. The pulse of the lagoon was beating landward.

The gondola flew through the azure mystery of the night.

In the distance the churches of Venice, San Giorgio and San Erasmo, loomed, large and dusky silhouettes, from the clinging vapors. The moist lead of their cupolas reflected the sheen of the pallid moonlight.

With a heavy heart Zuan reviewed the events of the night.

Heaven and hell seemed leagued against him. His giant antagonist granted no respite. Hostile forces beset his path on every turn. Death lurked on land and sea.

A sense of profound gloom had settled over him. The mystery he had come to solve seemed to intensify with every effort at its solution.

From between the curtains of the *felzé* he absently watched the belt of darkness that followed the distant shore. The tide lapped dreamily against the sides of the gondola. Little

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whispers and gurgling sounds stole up to him from the quivering murk of the waters.

The feeling of the night grew upon him.

Twice he was about to address the gondolier, just to hear a human voice. Twice he desisted, as if warned by a silent oracle.

After a time heavy mists began to steam up from the waters, and it grew so dark that moon and stars were blotted out and it was impossible to distinguish the islands.

It was a night made for a tragedy.

CHAPTER XII

THE PHANTOM GONDOLA



FROM the steeples of Venice pealed the gongs of midnight.

The marvelous echoes of their chimes had hardly died to silence when Zuan thought he heard the sound of a muffled oar, rhythmically beating the waters. When he peered from the *felzé*, his eyes met but phantasmal shreds of mist, and the oily gloom of

the water.

A sense of danger, not to be resisted, invaded his heart. He was familiar with the tales of the gondoliers. He remembered the story of the fisherman who had sworn on the cross that he had seen the Phantom Gondola upon the lagunes, rowed by the dead and manned by the spirits of the departed.

He wondered whether the gondolier had heard it, too. The frail, supple craft flew over the dark, quivering tide. But the sound of the oars, beating the waters in rhythmic cadence, never quitted his listening ear.

Now a strange radiance began slowly to pierce the mist.

Whatever the craft, and it was one of many oars, it came on directly in their wake.

The radiance increased. A white stream of light shot out upon the waters, which gleamed silvery beneath its rays.

He no longer heard the sound of muffled oars, only the surging of the waves as they beat against the prow of a ship.

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And now he became conscious of a presence that carried before it the icy breath of Death — a presence not of this world, but of things unknowable, of things hidden behind the veil.

The radiance grew to a dazzling intensity, lighting up the dark and silent lagune and a long, black gondola, that came swishing through the waters, sombre against the sombre background of the night.

The gondolier had noted it, to o, though he turned not once to fix the source of the strange light that threw out his gondola in strong relief, while the blackness of night hung like a sable curtain behind the fantastic craft.

With redoubled efforts he drove his boat through the nocturnal waters, laboring with might and main to steer out of the path of the oncoming boat, out of the range of the phosphorescent beams.

Now it shot past with its phantom crew, and Stygian darkness succeeded, as the mantle of night and fog closed in once more upon the dark, unbroken expanse of the lagunes.

Zuan had seen the shadow of the great boat magnified in its own radiance as it swept past.

They were approaching the Riva.

Through the mist shone the lights of the distant Piazzetta in a blurred haze. The silent quays were dotted, here and there, with sleeping boatmen, wrapt in their cloaks and stretched full length upon their barges.

At last they came within sight of the ducal palace.

The campanile of San Giorgio Maggiore rose ghostly above the roofs and cupolas of its cloisters.

Quitting the *felzé* with a sense of dread that hung heavy upon him, Zuan, about to pay his reckoning, turned to his Charon.

The gondolier crossed himself with a start.

"The saints protect us! Is it you, my lord?"

The boatman's unfeigned surprise and terror startled Zuan.

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"Whom in the devil's name did you expect to find?" he exclaimed, as his Charon refused to accept the fare.

"God have mercy on our souls and save us from all harm," the gondolier muttered affrighted, then, without another word pushed off and, ere Zuan recovered from his surprise, his craft was lost in the mists that shrouded the lagunes.

Utterly nonplussed Zuan followed the vanishing gondola with his gaze.

After a time he directed his steps towards the quay, where the public gondoliers moor their boats.

"My lord, did you see it too?" the boatman whose services he engaged turned to him, a terror too great for words in his eyes.

"What is it, my good man?" Zuan queried, anticipating the unspoken answer.

"The Phantom Gondola has been seen on the lagunes," the affrighted boatman replied. "Woe to Venice! Woe to the City of the Sea!"

END OF BOOK THE SECOND



BOOK THE THIRD



CHAPTER I

THE MOVING MADONNA



THE day of days, the feast of St. Mark the Evangelist, dawned angrily over Venice.

A great blight seemed to have fallen upon the city. Thunderclouds hovered above the distant mountains of the mainland and loomed darkly over the torpid, waveless lagune.

There had been a growing fear for many days, yet no one knew why he feared. For Death stalked everywhere, death by the poniard, death by strange illness, the swift-lurking death that strikes unseen.

At break of dawn, when the first errant light ray pierced the angry cloud masses banked on the eastern horizon, two men were discovered hanging head downward between the columns of the Piazzetta.

And those who passed crossed themselves devoutly and commended their soul into the keeping of San Marco and the Saints.

During the days that followed his visit to the cemetery island, a visit whose memory weighed heavily upon him, Zuan had visited the Piazza of San Marco more frequently than usual.

When upon meeting Strozzi he detailed to him the terrors of that night, the latter proved a tense and interested listener.

"Need I remind you the spies of the Three are everywhere?"

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Distrust Venice to your dying day. None has fathomed her treachery and falsehood more deeply than myself."

Zuan nodded grimly.

"They tell a legend here in Venice. Once upon a time the Three honored with their attention one who had incurred their displeasure. So they sent to him, every morning, a red-haired man to bid him 'Good-day' — you know that red-haired man with the cap over his eyes. How many have the purpose of their life placed between the executioner's axe and the necessity of a miracle?"

After continuing their ramble for a time Strozzi by degrees touched upon the matter nearest to Zuan's heart.

"Are you at last reconciled to the inevitable?"

A negative gesture came in response.

"My very soul rebels at the thought, even though my eyes accept the testimony."

Strozzi pondered for a time.

"Why not place the seal upon your doubts forevermore?"

"Tell me!" came the despairing response.

"There resides in Venice a certain sorcerer, who boasts the power of summoning back to earth those who have passed behind the veil."

"An impostor, no doubt, who thrives on the credulity of the mob."

A deprecatory gesture preceded Strozzi's reply.

"Those who have sought him and have witnessed his spells, say not so."

Zuan listened, sick at heart, oppressed by a strange foreboding, to Strozzi's innuendo.

"Where abides the sorcerer?" he queried at last.

"Permit me to be your cicerone," Strozzi replied eagerly.

Zuan accepted the offer, thanking Strozzi for his good offices.

Thus it was agreed upon.

On the following night Zuan was to accompany Strozzi to

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the abode of the sorcerer, who was to set his soul at rest forevermore.

With a handshake they parted.

Each went on his own way.

As the day advanced, the anger of the sea spread over the lagunes, and the restlessness of the water seemed to communicate itself to the foundations of the city. The palaces and cupolas seemed to heave like boats. Seaweeds, torn from their bed, floated on the tide. Flocks of sea gulls gyrated in the wind. Their laughter could be heard above the crest of the storm.

Towards dusk Zuan directed his steps towards the Sacca della Misericordia. The storm had by this time somewhat abated. The rain had ceased, but the sky was heavily overcast, and the air was filled with a clammy mist. He made his way by muddy, ill-lighted paths, bordered by high walls, their drab monotony occasionally broken by a gate.

After a time he arrived in an unsavory lane, creeping between the tall houses. Watery pools gleamed here and there in the half-light.

This lane was known as the Rio del Cane, and ended abruptly at a low stone wall which marked the boundary line. The far towers of Madonna dell' Orto were to be traced in shadowy silhouette against the misty night-sky, and the great abbey church of the Misericordia cast its stupendous shadow across the Moorish palace of the Mastelli. At the head of the lane there were visible, in the deepening dusk, the ghostly outlines of a grey stone cross.

At the end of the narrow cut, where the water lanes intersected at right angles, there rose into the night a statue of the Madonna. Unlike most votive shrines in the more populous thoroughfares of Venice, it boasted of no lamp to send its guiding ray along the narrow path that led up to it.

Zuan was about to pass it with a genuflexion, when he gave a start.

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The statue of the Madonna had come to life!

Retreating into the shadows he watched, wide-eyed, breathless.

Was he about to witness a miracle?

Straining his eyes through the darkness, he saw the stone slowly revolve, disclosing an aperture from which emerged the masked form of a man.

With stealthy tread the apparition entered the lane and was swallowed up in the nocturnal murk.

Zuan approached the statue.

Testingly his hands glided over the surface of the stone to discover the hidden mechanism which had set the statue in motion.

It mocked his efforts to scorn and Zuan desisted at last wondering, if he had been the victim of an hallucination, wondering if a new mystery had been added to those that defied solution at his hands.

Then he plunged into the night that swallowed up his receding form.

CHAPTER II

THE INCANTATION



It was a dismal night.

The wind howled and shrieked across the lagunes, and distant thunder seemed to boom from the bowels of the earth.

Zuan was restlessly pacing the confines of his chamber at the tavern of The Saracen's Head. But a few moments remained to the appointed hour when Strozzi

took him to the abode of the wizard, who was to give peace to his tortured heart.

Every day his anxiety had increased. With every hour himself drawn nearer and nearer the brink of the hidden hand, a haunting voice, were paralyzing his port. No sooner did a seeming clue evolve itself from the recesses of his brain, than it was snatched away by the presence. It was in vain he tried to escape the yoke from it, but as a bond slave who, escaping from a master, drags with him the chains of his servitude. He could not divorce himself from the ever present sensation at his vision at the Frari had been real, that he had seen her and that her eyes had flashed recognition to his. All arguments to the contrary could not wean him from the truth. At times, in the frantic groping for truth, he tried to follow the quest like a fugitive upon whose person the chains of his master are still in force. He escaped with his

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chain and for that reason must of necessity become the prey of any one who should discover it and know how to make use of the discovery.

The events since his return to the City of the Sea had left a deep impression upon his mind and he was bound to admit to himself that his reason had surrendered to his emotions. Truth and falsehood were so hopelessly entangled in his mind that he often mistook the arguments which were in favor of the one for those in favor of the other. Thence it arose that the same blow which had almost unseated his reason caused the whole edifice of his faith to totter.

Many circumstances had occurred, not only to encourage, but to confirm his belief in the supernatural — and with the determination of the believer in his kismet he plunged blindly into the vortex.

Never before had Zuan experienced such an overwhelming sense of imminent peril, of a sinister presence, as that which oppressed him at this moment. The very atmosphere seemed impregnated with evil. It hovered on the air like the odor of the grave.

That inactive waiting for the blow which he knew to be pending, exceeded, in its toll upon his nerves, anything he had ever experienced.

A curious fascination kept his eyes on the door in expectancy of the man who was to enter! How the wind roared! It wailed over the canals like the moan of some restless spirit, some soul in torment! Zuan's brain swam and his heart was heavy. The drip, drip, of the rain outside sounded like the stealthy footfall of some secret spy. The lamp seemed to have caught his own spirit and was burning badly and fitfully. He grew more restless and irritable every moment. The foreboding of evil became more oppressive and he almost regretted having accepted Strozzi's offer.

The flickering lamp gave a dismal crackle and was extinguished.

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With an outcry more forcible than reverent Zuan groped about the room for some flints and, failing to find them, continued in his fruitless quest when he thought he heard footsteps in the corridor outside.

Immersed in the black gloom he paused and listened.

Steps were coming up the stairs. The next moment the door was opened and, from the dense obscurity enshrouding him, he could just distinguish a shadowy form standing on the threshold, peering into the room.

A strange sense of dread seemed to stiffen Zuan's tongue. Through the silence came Strozzi's voice calling his name.

With a determined effort Zuan broke the silence, that had held him like a coward in silent hiding, and came forth to meet his visitor.

"I am here, my lord Strozzi," he replied. "The light has gone out. I was trying to find some flints."

Strozzi coughed slightly.

"I feared you resented my visit and wished I had not come!"

"Frankly speaking," Zuan replied, almost brusquely, "the business at hand is hardly mirth-inspiring."

"It is not too late to recede."

There was something unspeakably sinister in the speaker's words.

At that moment a flash of lightning lighted up the room, revealing the sombre form of Strozzi, clad entirely in black, from the black beretta that covered his head to the black sandals encasing his feet. A gust of wind whistled under the door and roared down the chimney, drowned by the louder voice of the thunder.

Zuan collected himself at last.

"I am ready, my lord," he said, but Strozzi noted the unsteadiness of his voice.

"The business that waits is in very truth an awful one," he said. "It is no child's play to summon those who have passed behind the veil, to face them and lure from their

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reluctant tongues the secrets of the beyond. If the task is beyond your strength there is still time to desist. Once we enter the abode of him who will summon the phantom shapes from their narrow berths it will be too late."

"I am not myself to-night," Zuan replied apologetically, wroth at himself for having betrayed his feelings. "Let us go!"

Outside it was pitch black. It rained in spells. Now and then the sheen of the distant lightnings revealed vanishing palaces, as the gondola swished through the oily gloom of the waters.

Neither spoke and so occupied was Zuan with his own thoughts, that he did not heed the course of the gondola, as it sped on its nocturnal course, till they arrived at their goal.

Strozzi raised the grotesque bronze knocker and let it fall against the low iron-studded door. It swung inward with a groan and admitted them into a narrow, gloomy court hemmed in by high walls.

After some ten feet or more, an even narrower and less inviting passage revealed itself. It opened into a tiny cul-de-sac, flanked by dilapidated boarding.

Now a second door, hitherto unnoticed, opened to admit and closed behind them.

Zuan shivered and, notwithstanding his resolution to go through the ordeal, he was hardly master of himself. The passage which they had entered sloped downward. The walls reeked with dampness. It terminated before a door, where Strozzi repeated his signal.

After a moment or two of waiting they found themselves in a dimly lighted room of considerable height and length, almost completely bare of all furniture.

In the centre of this room stood the tall form of an Armenian. Zuan felt the deep eyes in the sallow face burning into his own, but, obedient to Strozzi's injunction, he refrained from speaking.

The Armenian turned to Strozzi.

"What is your wish, my lord?"

"You see before you one who desires to test your powers, to dissipate his doubts, to remove the veil from his eyes. Can you render him this important service?"

The Armenian hesitated.

"My lord Strozzi vouches for him?"

"As for myself."

"What do you desire?" the Armenian slowly turned to Zuan.

Now, the moment was at hand, Zuan was seized with dire misgivings. He had been taught that it was mortal sin to disturb the rest of the dead, a practice forbidden by the Church, under the ban of the Holy Office. If Fulvia had departed this life, was it for him to cite her from the beyond, to disturb the peace of her soul?

A stream of ice seemed to pervade him as these belated reflections upset all his prior resolutions, but knowing Strozzi's eyes to be upon him he turned to the Armenian.

"For the present I only desire a proof of your power. Let me see an apparition."

The Armenian regarded him fixedly.

"To what purpose?"

"To prepare my mind for further instruction," Zuan replied.

"I dare not cite a spirit merely to gratify your idle curiosity."

"It is not idle curiosity which prompts the request."

"I dare use my power over the departed only on the sacred condition that I do not abuse the same."

"I desire the truth!"

The Armenian exchanged a swift glance with Strozzi.

"Whom is it your wish that I summon?" he then turned to Zuan.

The latter seemed to consider.

His lips refused to utter the beloved name.

"One dear to me who has passed behind the veil!"

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"Had the departed received the blessings of the Church?" Zuan trembled as one in an ague.

"Why the question?"

"Over the blessed I have no power," the Armenian said darkly. "They dwell in a sphere which my spells cannot reach."

There was a pause.

Strozzi's eyes were upon his companion.

Zuan forced himself to speak, as the confession was wrung from him.

"She died during my absence from Venice."

"Her name?" the Armenian questioned.

Zuan stared unseeing into space.

"Her name?" he gave back the sorcerer's question.

"To summon her, I must call her by her name."

Again the heavy, interminable silence. Again Zuan's lips refused to utter the beloved name.

He felt the eyes of Strozzi fixed upon him.

"Fulvia!"

The Armenian nodded.

"I will do what I can," he said, entering an adjoining room.

Shortly he returned and announced that all was ready, beckoning to his patrons to follow him.

During his brief absence neither Zuan nor Strozzi had spoken.

Before entering the room the Armenian bade his guests remove their shoes. Then he bolted the door behind them.

The room differed but little from the one they had just left. In the centre, a large circle was drawn with charcoal upon the floor. An altar, covered with a black cloth, rose from a carpet of red satin within the circle. Upon it was revealed a Chaldee Bible, together with a skull. A silver crucifix rose upon the altar. Instead of candles some spirits of wine, burning in a silver vessel, diffused a scant illumination. A thick smoke of frankincense filled the room and almost strangled the meager light.

The Armenian wore a long cassock. His feet were bare. From his neck an amulet was suspended by a chain of human hair. On his black cassock were embroidered cabalistical characters interwoven with symbolical figures in crimson. He enjoined complete silence and above all not to question the apparition.

Then he took his place on the red satin carpet, his face turned to the east, muttering an incantation that lasted apace.

On a sudden there was a flash of lightning. A terrific crash of thunder shook the house. The locks jarred, the doors creaked, the hood fell over the spirit lamp and extinguished the light.

On the opposite wall, there appeared a shadowy form, pale with the pallor of death.

"Who calls me?" spoke a voice.

"One who cherishes your memory and prays for your soul," replied the sorcerer.

The answers of the apparition came in long intervals.

"What does he want?"

Zuan was straining towards the eerie phantom that wavered against the blackness of the wall.

"He desires to know the cause of your death?"

A moan hovered on the silence.

"I died in mortal sin."

"Whence come you?"

"Eternity is mute."

"Can he render you a service in this world?"

"To think of himself and forget."

A crash of thunder that shook the whole structure in its foundations followed on the heels of a lightning flash that illumined the room with a blinding glare.

Without a moment's warning Zuan leaped from the circle towards the apparition that was slowly receding and seemed about to dissolve into space.

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At that moment a blow crashed down upon his head and he fell senseless on the floor of the chamber.

When he regained consciousness he found himself in the *felzê* of a gondola. By his side sat Lucio Strozzi.

For some moments Zuan was too utterly dazed to even question his companion regarding the events that had preceded his swoon.

Strozzi's voice fell upon his ear.

"Unmindful of the wizard's injunctions you quitted the circle. It is little short of a miracle, the evil spirits did not tear you to pieces."

"Then I have seen Fulvia?"

Strozzi nodded darkly.

"You have seen her spirit."

Zuan stared unseeing into space, but made no reply.

When they had returned to the inn, they parted, Strozzi appearing greatly affected by the other's grief.

Zuan did not enter the hostelry at once.

Standing in the shadow of the landing, his gaze followed Strozzi's retreating form, an inscrutable expression in his eyes. As the gondola veered into mid-channel, Strozzi's face appeared in a quick, backward glance between the drawn curtains of the *felzê*.

It was immediately withdrawn and the gondola merged with the shadows.

Grimly setting his teeth Zuan entered the hostelry.

CHAPTER III

THE REGATTA



THE morning of Ascension Day dawned clear and bright.}

The City of the Sea had donned the dazzling raiment of festival.

The Marangona, the great bell of San Marco pealed the signal and the bells from all the churches and cloisters of Venice from San Giovanni in Bragora to Santa Maria Formosa clashed together

in a tempest of sound.

The belfries of the island churches answered with their silvery chimes that sent their vibrations far out to sea, to Tremodia, Tre Porti and Malamocco.

A large and stately barge lay moored beside the mole.

She bore the golden figure of Justice on her bow and her topmost deck sloped upward to the stern, where two carved figures held aloft a curving shell that formed the canopy for a throne.

Over the throne floated the broad, silken banner of San Marco, the Wingéd Lion on a golden ground, its paw on the open evangel. From stern to stern the upper deck of this galley of a hundred feet was roofed in crimson velvet. From the portholes of the lower deck forty-two great oars protruded, lying upon the water, each oar with its four rowers, workmen of the arsenal, waiting to row the Doge out to sea.

A hush of expectancy lay upon the multitudes, cowed by

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recent events and mysterious portents which their brains failed to grasp. The fear was still upon them. Thus they waited, and the sun rose higher in the heavens.

The bells had ceased ringing, but now they renewed their brazen clangor and the fanfare of the Dalmatians announced the commencement of the greatest of Venetian ceremonies, the Marriage of the Sea.

From the massive portals of the ducal palace there issued a long and stately procession.

An old man, bowed with age and the cares of his office, came first, Giovanni Gradenigo, the Doge. The strong, aristocratic features which the yellow skin covered like parchment were set in dignity and repose. Here, at least, among his people, he was still the ruler of Venice, whatever he represented behind the doors of his gloomy abode.

Over the white linen cap he wore the hornéd bonnet, unjewelled, unadorned. His shoulders were covered with a rich tippet of ermine and, below the fur, the heavy mantle of gold brocade fell to his feet and trailed upon the marble pavement.

The javelin men were opening an avenue through the throngs that cheered loudly as they beheld their prince, and the stalwart forms of the Dalmatian bodyguard presented their serried ranks.

After the Doge came a train of nobles and great officers of state, the ambassadors of the Most Christian and the Most Catholic Kings, the Procuratori of San Marco, the Senate, the members of the great Council, as far as it still existed after its dissolution by Tiepolo, in robes of crimson and scarlet and the stoles of the various orders of knighthood.

Among deafening shouts of acclaim they boarded the Bucentaur, the nobles ranging themselves down either side of the long, carved gallery and through their midst the Doge passed to his throne.

The oars struck the water to the sound of trumpets and

clarions and fifes. The great barge began slowly to sway; slowly it receded from the shore. The standard of San Marco unfurled itself in a hardly perceptible breeze. The other boats formed in line and floated out to sea in the wake of the Bucentaur.

The Doge of the Nicolotti led the train. He was the chief of the Venetians on Ascension Day and was marshalling the crowds that followed.

First came the barges of the glass-blowers from Murano. Their trophies of crystal, ruby and opal wares shimmered and scintillated in the rays of the sun that shone from a cloudless azure.

Behind these came the barges of the Six Fraternities, the Carita, San Marco, San Teodoro, San Giovanni, the Misericordia and San Rocco, each displaying at its stern the banner of the brotherhood.

After these came the whole population of the city, that had turned out to behold the ceremony of the Wedding of the Sea.

Far out the glittering pageant swept over the sunlit spaces of the great estuary of San Marco, the great Bucentaur towering in its van. As they passed the island convent of Santa Elena, another barge stole noiselessly upon the water and joined the procession.

Its rowers brought it close up to the stern of the Bucentaur and the white mitred Primate of Venice with all his company of bishops, canons and priests and the chapter of his church at San Pietro in Castello passed on board the ducal barge.

Behind the Primate of Venice came the acolytes, carrying the golden basins filled with roses. In a cloud of incense the Primate of Venice moved up the centre of the great galley and took his seat below the steps that led to the ducal throne.

The Doge beckoned to the acolytes and they approached and ranged themselves beside his chair. From the golden basins he gave a rose to each.

And now the great Bucentaur and all its glittering train had

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passed between San Nicolo and Sant' Andrea and had reached the open lagune beyond the low barrier of the Lido. The barge slowly turned its bow towards the land and its stern towards the dark, heaving expanse of the Adriatic Sea.

Now the Doge and the Primate of Venice both arose. The latter sprinkled holy water on the ring which the Doge held in his open palm and pronounced the blessing.

Then old Giovanni Gradenigo passed out alone by a door in the carved wood behind the throne, on to the stern gallery of the barge.

In silence he raised the ring on high.

Scarcely a splash was heard, scarcely a ripple appeared, as the ring sank into the silent deep.

Then for the first time the silence of the ceremony was broken and, as the ring dropped from his hand, the Doge cried: "Desponsamus te Mare," and, instantly, from thousands of throats, there came the answering cry, rolling like thunder across the broad, sunlit expanse.

Slowly the Bucentaur headed for the basin of San Marco, the crowd of smaller boats following in the wake of the barge of state.

With shouts of joy, with song and merriment, the aquatic pageant swept towards the Riva.

Gondolas, decked with gaudy draperies and weighted down with flowers began to assemble along the Grand Canal. Everywhere roared the festa. Strange figures with hideous visages mingled with the throngs.

All Venice was preparing to attend the event of the day, the great regatta between the rival factions of the Castellani and Nicolotti. The prospects of the race and the quality of the rowers were eagerly discussed by both factions, crowding round the tables of their wine shops.

The Nicolotti were the descendants of the aristocratic faction of ancient Heraclea, long before Rialto became the capital of the lagunes. The Castellani, descendants of the democrats

of Jesolo, represented the people. The Nicolotti wore a black cap and sash, the Castellani wore red.

The principal centres of their factions were, and still are, at San Giovanni in Bragora, behind the Riva and at San Gregorio, while the Nicolotti held the parts from San Giovanni è Paolo to the end of the Grand Canal and back again to San Gervasio è Protasio. At this point the factions were conterminous, the church of San Trovaso with its opposing doors, the one facing the quarter of the Nicolotti, the other that of the Castellani, standing neutral between them.

Long before the hour set for the great regatta the canal was alive with every conceivable craft and gradually the gondolas settled down in a solid mass beneath the eaves of the great palaces that bordered the Grand Canal.

The great Venetian waterway was a flutter of flags from end to end. The palace fronts were draped with rich tapestries from the looms of the East. The balconies were filled with men and women in holiday attire, watching the assembling of the boats. Most of these were making towards the Palazzo Foscari, where the winning post was placed.

At the water-stairs of the Palazzo Strozzi a gondola, in no wise distinguishable from the rest of the craft afloat on this day, lacking every distinction of a noble house, with its complement of four black-garbed gondoliers, awaited its occupants.

Now, beneath the massive portal of the sombre structure, there appeared a man and a woman.

On the threshold they paused for a moment. The woman, absorbed in thought, seemed hardly to note the fact that the craft which lay in waiting was not the barge of state commonly used by Strozzi, or if she noted it, she passed it without comment.

In Fulvia's eyes shone an expression that seemed utterly at variance with the day and the joyous scene around her.

"Then you adhere to your resolution not to wear the mask?"

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Strozzi turned to the woman, a feverish glitter in his eyes.

"I have stated my intention," Fulvia replied without bestowing a glance upon him.

"I rejoice to know it," he bowed with a dark smile.

There was something in his tone that caused her to start.

"Why so, my lord?"

"I shall accept it as your intention to appear as that which you are — my wife."

To this taunt Fulvia made no reply. Instead she donned her mask.

Silently she entered the waiting gondola and Strozzi, after taking his seat beside her, gave the word to the gondolier.

Through the pomp and splendor of the Grand Canal the sombre gondola of Strozzi made its way to its appointed station near the Palazzo Foscari.

But when the barge swept up to the mooring posts, Fulvia's eyes grew wide beneath the mask and her face turned pale as death. Nevertheless she pretended to be interested in the water pageant, knowing that Strozzi's watchful eyes were upon her.

Here, where the prize was to be awarded to the winner, a platform had been erected, covered with a blue silken canopy, supported by slender pillars, entwined with silver tinsel.

Beneath the canopy was a chair covered with crimson velvet and gold brocade. The platform was approached by carpeted stairs whose coverings trailed in the water. This stair was guarded by a score or more of individuals whose fantastic livery and warlike panoply seemed not intended for idle display alone.

But it was neither the platform nor the improvised throne, nor the barbaric guard that held Fulvia's gaze and caused all the blood to flow back upon her heart.

It was the occupant of the chair, upon whom her gaze was directed, a woman who seemed to set the very air alight with her beauty.

One glimpse of the man at her side answered her unspoken question. In his look of triumph she read the confirmation of her fears.

And, as if each woman had intuitively felt the nearness of the other, Yaga suddenly turned her head towards Strozzi's gondola, as if to seek out its masked occupant. Both women turned pale to the lips as they met each other's gaze. Each read the silent challenge in the other's eyes. Both knew it was a duel to the death between them and that neither would relinquish the object nearest to her heart.

After adjusting her mask, Yaga turned her attention to the business of the hour. Fulvia's heart was heavy. How beautiful was her rival! Had Strozzi spoken the truth after all?

He was watching her, enjoying his triumph, the torture in which her soul was writhing. Once his eyes met the furtive glance of Yaga, a glance of doubt, promise and wonder.

Then he, too, turned his attention to the spectacle which had assembled all Venice by the banks of the Grand Canal.

In reality Strozzi paid no heed to the preparations for the impending regatta. It was all one to him whether the Castellani or the Nicolotti carried off the prize which was to be bestowed upon the victor by Yaga's white hand. Furtively his glance wandered among the compact mass of gondolas that extended along both sides of the Palazzo Foscari. Then with a shade of disappointment he turned away.

The ringing of the bells, blending with the sound of fanfares from the arsenal announced that the contending factions had started.

The course of the Regatta ran from the present site of the public gardens to the Rialto and back to the Palazzo Foscari.

The Castellani were in the lead, but apparently losing ground, for they had taken the line where the current of the incoming tide flowed strongest. Each gondola urged forward. The excitement grew intense.

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Now a gondola crept into the clearing between the contending factions and headed straightway for the Palazzo Foscari.

A Purple Domino was standing erect on the poop, his gaze straining towards the group that had been disclosed between the dark canopy of the Strozzi gondola.

Suddenly he was seen to give a start as his eyes rested upon the fair occupant reclining among the cushions. By her side sat a masked cavalier of whose identity neither his mask nor the appointments of the craft vouchsafed a clue.

The woman's attention had been attracted to the strange manoeuvres of the Purple Domino. She started, as if she had seen a ghost. For a moment that seemed interminable they held each other's gaze.

A baleful light gleamed in Strozzi's eyes.

"Listen, Fulvia *mia*," he turned to the woman by his side, and his purring accents roused her hatred of the man to fever pitch. "As sure as the gondola of the Purple Domino touches mine and you give the least sign of recognition, — that moment is his last."

Just at this moment as if it had touched some contagious object, the strange gondola sped away and was lost to sight.

The race swept by, the Castellani leading, the Nicolotti close behind, plodding heavily, but dangerous in their evident strength. Then the gondolas, like a comet with long, black tail, took the curve at the present site of the Redentoré and disappeared in the Giudecca Canal.

"Take me back to the palace," Fulvia turned to Strozzi.

Her very soul was writhing within her.

An indescribable fear was upon her.

She had recognized the Purple Domino.

Yet she had not dared vouchsafe even a glimpse of recognition to the man for whom every fibre of her soul yearned in love and in anguish. For behind his gondolier, unseen by the

latter, stood Sordello, the bravo. His very life depended upon her discretion.

Strozzi, proud in his triumph, tried to encircle her with his arms.

She turned upon him like a lioness at bay.

"Dare but touch me!" she said, hardly above a whisper, but there was something in her eyes that gave him pause.

Had Fulvia noted the sinister light in Strozzi's eyes, she would indeed have trembled, for the man she loved, and for herself.

CHAPTER IV

THE LOTUS WOMAN



THE day of the Regatta had sped. The sun was nearing the gigantic acropolis of the Dolomites. An immense phalanx of clouds, disordered as if by battle, shot through by numberless arrows of gold and bathed in the crimson glow of sunset, towered above the Euganean Hills. The whole estuary of San Marco was mantled in gloomy magnificence, as if myriads of sunset flags were drooping over it, awaiting the trumpet calls of night.

The west was a sea of liquid fire and, as its scintillating waves spread from shore to shore, like some spectacular illusion, the mirage of some exquisite dream, the City of the Sea rose as from some pellucid interspace of world and world.

The dreams of domination, of pleasure and of glory, which Venice had nursed, then strangled in her marble arms, seemed again to rise from the foundations of her palaces, entering by the open balconies of the night. In the glow of the evening sun the sumptuous basilica was emerging from its blue-green shadows, with its cupolas, its scrolls, its statues, its columns, its balustrades, like the temple of a magician.

The orange glow of day was fading.

The face of the twilight was bending over the lagunes.

Far away, across the mysterious expanse, the leaning spire of Burano and Mazzorbo's lightning-blasted tower gleamed in

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startling silhouette against the purple storm cloud. San Francesco del Deserto dreamed crimson in the afterglow. The willows and acacias on the shores of San Erasmo were passing from the dull green of distant foliage into the brilliancy of chrysoberyl. Far to northward Torcello rose in pallid solitude above the level disk of the marsh. The Lido, like a huge serpent, coiled itself against the sunset sky. Faintly the chant of the monks going up in the twilight of San Pietro Martiré in Murano was wafted across the silent expanse of the waters. Then the chimes of the Angelus from all the churches and cloisters of Venice echoed over the darkening estuary of San Marco, taken up by the island churches, carrying their message of peace far out towards the shadowy shores.

Never were reflections more involved than those with which Zuan reviewed the events of the regatta, his second meeting with Fulvia, whose apparition a lying juggler had conjured before his vision.

Was Strozzi leagued with the impostor for some dark, unfathomed purpose?

It was Fulvia, as she lived in his memory, Fulvia, unchanged, even more beautiful than in the days of their happiness. Even the mask had not been able to hide her wondrous charm.

He found himself face to face with a baffling, terrible mystery.

Again by some trick of fate she had evaded him. She had not vouchsafed him even a glance of recognition. His guarded inquiries regarding the occupant of the gondola had elicited scant information from those to whom he turned in his dilemma.

Yaga's mocking glances might have given him food for thought.

He felt all things estranged, remote, unexisting, as one who is being swept to some incalculable doom.

Gondolas were passing and repassing on the water, green and velvety like the new leaves of the river willows. The lagoon was heaving in long undulations and across the sunset waters came the song of the boatmen.

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"Za per dirtelo o Catina
La campagna me consola,
Ma Venezia è la sola
Che me possa contemar.
O Venezia benedetta
No te voggio piu lassar."

He gazed out upon the glittering waters, lost gardens of the lost lagune, islands forgotten of men. He cowered under his destiny, as under a yoke.

For him her image had been framed in the circle of an unforgettable aureole. The chords of the lyre had snapped and life was left a waste.

In vain was he taking council of himself.

Face to face with this dread mystery, where was he to turn?

The sunset glow had faded from the water.

The cup of night was brimming with the wine of mystery.

The song of the boatmen came more faintly over the darkening expanse:

"O Venezia benedetta
No te voggio piu lassar."

Zuan began to review every minute incident since his return to Venice, hoping thereby to throw some new light on the situation. Everything seemed to point to the existence of a favored and formidable rival. Strozzi's untiring endeavors to reconcile him to Fulvia's death, his strange restlessness, his mysterious absences, all these matters gave food for thought, yet offered no clue. Despairingly Zuan lost himself in the intricate labyrinth of intangible surmises.

It needed even now all his resolution, not to succumb to the numbing effects of doubt and fear, as his gondola swept the waste of water now silent under the stars. The scent of new-mown hay was wafted to him from San Erasmo and along the terraced shores the cicadas chirped their evening song.

The storm had passed to eastward over the Friulian Alps and the moon was rising behind San Giorgio Maggiore, pour-

ing her pale halo over the broad sweep of the Giudecca Canal. The night wind brought a sense of coolness and relief. It came from the sea to which his dreaming consciousness turned as in silent surrender.

A great water pageant floated from the water-stairs of the Piazzetta to San Giorgio Maggiore, as Zuan's gondola landed near the palace of the Doge.

The Piazza and Piazzetta were a blaze of light that shed its radiance over the vast throngs moving to and fro, gossiping over the latest news from Constantinople, the latest rumors from Genoa.

Zuan made his way towards the Piazza.

The glitter of a thousand colored lanterns dazzled the eyes. A conglomerate din assailed the ear. A barber on a scaffolding shaved and drew teeth amidst the jeering of the onlookers, while the quack across the Piazza bawled through a tin horn the praise of his miraculous pills. A hippopotamus newly brought from the wilds of Africa and the Bearded Lady from Fez vied with each other for the honor as chief attraction.

Mingling with the ever shifting crowds, Zuan had the sensation of being followed by a mask, who disappeared each time he turned to satisfy his doubts.

Zuan continued his seemingly aimless ramble when the sensation manifested itself again.

His temper being thoroughly tried by the events of the day, he faced about with the determination to teach the intruder a lesson he would not forget, when he found himself face to face with a slender girl, who gave him a searching look, then thrust a folded parchment into his hand and disappeared ere he had been conscious of her presence.

Making his way to a spot comparatively secluded and free from intrusion, Zuan broke the silken cord.

"A gondola lies waiting at the water-stairs of Santa Fosca. Delay not a moment! The watchword is 'Fulvia.'"

A few moments later Zuan found himself at the designated

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spot, found the waiting gondola, gave the word, entered the *felzé* and was being rowed rapidly down the Grand Canal whose gorgeous palaces looked down upon their own reflected images in the water.

The night was drenched in magic and moonlight.

Long, cool shadows swept the canal. The expanse of water was like celestial silk.

It was now close on to midnight, and all Venice was abroad. Gondolas filled with musicians and hung with paper lanterns lay beneath the lighted palace windows, or drifted with their burden of song and laughter out upon the oily reaches of the lagune.

As the prow of the gondola slipped past garden walls, covered with crimson creepers, below the blackness of low, arched bridges, Zuan felt the fathomless mystery of the Venetian night; not the open night of the lagune, but the secret dusk of nameless waterways between blind windows and complaisant gardens, where lurked many a mystery.

The gondola rounded the corner of the narrow canal of Santa Chiara. A moment later the steel prow touched a postern, and he found himself at the water-stairs of a garden. In the distance a brown church and a campanile prayed silently to the stars.

Snapdragons blossomed in the crumbling walls. The moonlight streamed through the vine pergolas and starred the grass with shining petals.

With heavily beating heart Zuan set his foot on the discolored slippery steps that led up to a low parapet in which there was a gate.

With a drear sense of foreboding he heard the bolt slip back to give him admittance, the stealthy fall of the oar, as the gondola slid under the shadows of the convent walls of Santa Chiara.

Like a dream walker he entered the garden, pausing every now and then to look around, as if he expected to see some

unguessed presence detaching itself from every tree or shrub.

The garden was bathed in the whiteness of the higher soaring moon. Marble colonnades detached themselves against silver-misted foliage. The garden spectrally outspread seemed to enclose him as in a magic circle.

He rambled on, vaguely wondering, drawn to the innermost depths of shade. The hush grew deeper as he advanced, the murmur of the lagoon more remote, more mysterious. Statues of Fauns, Bacchantes, Tritons and Nereides gleamed from laurel thickets. A yew arbor invited him to a bench niched in its inmost dusk. Seen through the black arch of the arbor the moonlight lay like snow on parterres and trellis walks.

He thought of Fulvia, of her delight in a Buen Retiro such as this garden — Fulvia —

He paused and looked about.

The yew branches seemed to stir and from some deeper recess of shade a white gleaming figure evolved itself and came towards him.

He could not see her face, but he knew it was Fulvia, and every fibre of his being, every nerve in his body, quivered to her slow and rhythmic approach.

Dazzled and blinded by the outer moonlight he could just vaguely discern the outlines of the woman, who came towards him. For a moment the dusk of the yew arbor swallowed her up. Suddenly he felt himself encircled by two gleaming arms. Two lips were pressed against his own in an insatiate kiss.

He reeled under the intoxication of the moment, when the white arms fell away, the woman took a backward step.

Before him stood Yaga.

She had timed her assault with fiendish cunning.

The night and the moon, the flower laden air and his own defeat were her allies. Could any mortal resist this phalanx marshalled to the conflict, combined with the magic of her own loveliness?

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Even while disappointment, anger, consternation surged through his very soul, Zuan knew that the danger of her spell was greater than ever, and she, watching his every gesture, was prepared for the conflict that must end in victory or defeat for the one of them or the other.

The time for equivocation had passed.

He too knew that to-night he must break the spell which this Lotus Woman had woven about him, else he was lost forevermore and with him Venice and whatever he held dearest on earth.

"Welcome, my lord Zuan!" she spoke in mocking tones, noting chagrin and consternation on his brow, dark as a thundercloud. "Truly, the feasts of the gods are not for the palates of clod-bound mortals."

He regarded her gloomily.

"For what dark purpose have I been summoned to your presence, Princess?"

Yaga gave an amused smile.

"Is the thought that it is I who have called to you and not that other, so repellent? Love gives, but urges no claim."

"Speak not of love to me, Princess," he replied darkly. "You who have feasted at many a board should not urge so belated a passion!"

His irony cut her to the quick.

"You know not of what you speak, my lord Zuan, and like the common herd you poison the stream whereof you drink at the fountain head. I was not destined to wear the halo of a saint and my quest for happiness has led me into devious by-paths. But never have I loved man as I love you, though, blind fool, you will not see!"

She came nearer, her eyes on a level with his own.

"Look at me, Zuan!" she said in low, impassioned tones. "You came here, thinking to meet another, whose love for you, as against mine, is like the glow-worm lantern compared with the blinding light of the sun. I love you with a love so

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idolatrous that it has corroded the very soul within me."

Gliding up to him she laid her two white hands on his shoulders and compelled his eyes to meet her own.

"You doubt me! Fool!" she cried in an access of anger, while the whiteness of her arms made him dizzy and he desired nothing so much as to make an end of the scene and the woman. "Look at these white hands of mine that almost destroyed Natalie Volutich. Does one beautiful woman challenge another to the death for a whim? And my rival was as spirited as she was beautiful. We proved each other. Never have I met her equal. But you — the noble hero, sought his paradise elsewhere — in the arms of your marble saint, whose spirit still hovers on the dark borderland between heaven and hell! Beware, my friend! I am not accustomed to suing for favors. I will not be spurned a third time with impunity. Yes! I lured you hither with the magic name I hate, as I hate her who bears it. For good or bad I am weary of weighing chances. Zuan, love me! And I will give you such love as woman never gave to man. Do not deny me, Zuan — my very soul is aflame."

And as she spoke, she drew closer to him, till at last she flung one white arm about his neck and, gazing upon him with her sea-green unfathomable eyes, smiled her slow, intoxicating smile, that like an opening flower, revealed beauty hidden within beauty.

Closer she bent, and still more close, till her perfumed breath played upon his hair and now her lips met his.

He reeled under that kiss, more deadly than the embrace of death. Her white arms coiled about him, she continued her pleading.

"Truly, you have never loved, Zuan, you never have known such love as I could give, never have you lost yourself in the mystery of another soul, nor learned how nature overcomes our naked loneliness with the golden web of love."

Her face, wondrously beautiful, was lighted by the pale

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rays of the moon. But, though Zuan's senses were reeling under her insatiate kisses that almost took from him his manhood, the gloom deepened on his brow, while with moist hungry lips she kissed him, again and again, whispering delirious endearments into his drunken ear.

For a moment he submitted with heavily beating heart.

Did this woman love him in very truth?

The paramour of the Ban of Bosnia, the woman famed for her illicit loves throughout the Venetian domains, was speaking words to him, such as he would have deemed passing strange, save coming from lips pure and undefiled.

At last, almost on the verge of merging his whole being into her own, Zuan succeeded in extricating himself from the steely coils of those white arms.

Gentle as the gesture was, its effect upon the woman was lightning like.

"Princess," he said in cold and constrained tones, "forgive the man whose eyes have been blinded by a glittering dream."

She stood before him like a marble statue.

Only her heaving bosom, the strange light in her eyes, testified to her pent-up emotions.

"Nay, my lord Zuan," she said musingly, with a supreme effort to control her hurt pride and mortification. "I know not but Fate is giving birth to strange events to-night and in her painful throes mayhap shall crush me in her grip — myself or you — or both of us! And, if that be so, well would I learn from you before it is too late that it was but a dream — a dream forgot."

Never had Zuan felt his utter impotence to cope with this woman more acutely. Would she but offer him a lever to pave his way into the secrets hidden beyond that glittering exterior, to learn the true purpose of her presence in Venice and under whose protecting ægis she defied the Doge and the Venetian state!

She regarded him with a curious smile, as if she had read his thoughts.

"What is the past but a dream," he spoke at last, "and with what face shall the waking come?"

"Now you are falling to my humors, my lord Zuan," she purred, and he knew that her temper was aroused to a dangerous pitch. "And as you say — we dream — and while we dream, yet can the vision change! For wonderful are the fantasies of dreams, seeing that they have no stability, but vary like the vaporous edge of sunset clouds, building now this thing, now that. But remember, my lord Zuan, when the waking comes, the vagaries of our sleep will be more unalterable and enduring than the stars!"

Never had he seen her in a mood like this before. And as she concluded, she smiled with a smile more fateful, than any stamp of grief graven upon the brow.

And he knew, as he knew Yaga, that with this smile she was consecrating him to perdition, that his doom at her hands was sealed.

There was a strange gleam in her eyes, and a shadow fell across the beautiful face.

"Am I then so foul a thing," she said musingly, as out of a dream, "that no man dare love me? Or," her tone grew more menacing, "is it still the pale phantom of the woman I hate that compels your homage? Answer me, my friend! I am only a woman, but, by the Bela Reka, I'll not brook a rival! Be-think yourself. Do as you will, Zuan, but as you put me from you, I shall destroy you both."

He listened to her words, counting his own heart beats.

"What do you know of Fulvia?" he turned to her, knowing she had spoken truth. "Tell me, I implore you!"

"Ah!" she replied with her inscrutable smile. "For once I have matched my woman's wit against your own. From moment to moment did I wonder which one of us would conquer, as we matched guile with guile. Know then, my friend,

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Fulvia lives — most virtuous and constant of lovers! Fulvia, your marble saint, lives — the paramour of another, whom neither your steel, nor your prayers may reach. Even this very day you stood, eye in eye, — though she vouchsafed you not a glance!

For a moment the lurid anger blazed in her face, then her features hardened into a rigidly cold expression of disdain.

"Ah," she continued as he stood before her, stricken dumb. "Are you angel or demon that you dare to defy me? You should be either or both to array yourself against Yaga. Headstrong fool! You know not what you lost!"

Her lithe form quivered in the throes of her pent-up emotion.

"Where is she?" Zuan stammered, gazing with lost eyes down the vista of the yew arbor.

Yaga's splendid eyes shot forth a resentful fire.

"Seek and find," came the cryptic reply. "And remember Yaga."

He stared at her fixedly, then turned to go, without a word.

There was a chill as of death in the air. The moon hung low and the tree tops were beginning to tremble.

She raised a white, detaining hand.

"One moment, my friend! You have spurned Yaga — I will not give so much for nothing. You shall purchase your freedom. The price shall be a heavy one."

Ere he knew it, he found himself a prisoner in her arms, felt her insatiate kiss upon his lips.

With a low, cruel laugh she released him at last.

"Farewell, my friend!" she said in her low, vibrant voice. "The hour is yours! To-morrow I shall claim you!"

The cup of the night was ebbing. The moon was sinking in a quilted bed of clouds.

Zuan walked down the avenue toward the water gate, as one stunned.

Yaga's words had been but the echo of his own fears.

Obedying an impulse outside himself he paused for a moment and looked back.

And as he did so his eyes met a strange sight.

Far away, in the centre of the clearing, where the moonlight fell full upon her, her head thrust back, her arms outstretched, as though to clasp him in her embrace, on her face an anguished passion so terrible that his own heartbeats stopped, stood Yaga, and so terrifying proved the effect of the vision, that Zuan turned and fled towards the water gate that separated the garden from the narrow strip of shore beyond.

CHAPTER V

LIFE, THE SPHINX



IN a dusky chamber of the Palazzo Strozzi, lighted with wax tapers and hung with brocade, Fulvia was alone, lost in ruminations of the past.

At that moment she was sounding the full depths of her misery and was fast becoming lost in utter darkness.

All that had caused her to cling to life was slipping away, even grief and hatred. Utterly crushed by the consciousness of her defeat, she had accepted her fate. She had even lost the capacity for suffering, submitting with mournful indifference, as one utterly dazed. What terrible mystery encompassed her? Zuan had returned to Venice, the man she had mourned for dead five long years, lived. Why had he made no effort to discover her abode, to bring about a meeting, if his love was unchanged, like her own? Face to face they had stood at the regatta and, though Strozzi's threat had prevented her from crying out to him, he at least knew nothing thereof. Ever and ever the thought that it was Yaga whom he had followed to Venice pierced her brain. It was in the direction of her pavilion that his gondola had sped away. Why had he not followed Strozzi's gondola when the pageant broke?

She had met her rival face to face. She had set eyes upon the woman who had taken from her all she had held dear in life.

Strozzi had not exaggerated. Rather had he been too chary in his praises of Yaga's beauty. It dazzled the senses, caused the very brain to reel. Again there was something in the charm of those perfect features, in the blinding whiteness of those arms and hands, that stung every fibre of Fulvia's womanhood. For the first time she, vaguely, understood what had impelled the fair Ragusan to challenge her beautiful rival to a duel to the death. Never had she been filled with so mad a desire to strangle one of her own sex.

After she had returned to the solitude of her own chamber, her feelings had suffered a sudden reverse.

For the moment even her pride seemed to have deserted her.

Nothing was left of the spirited creature of former days. To herself she seemed a purposeless marionette, moved hither and thither by any chance hands on the strings.

Something had suddenly snapped within her.

The thought of Yaga's imaginary triumph no longer filled her soul with rebellion. She merely felt herself in the throes of a terrible barrenness. Too much suffering had dried up her heart.

Why continue the uneven fight for happiness?

That part of her life which had seemed to her worth living, the years of her love for Zuan, was slowly fading away, as a landscape eaten away by the evening shadows crumbles into the night.

An infinite love had filled her life! To this love she had sacrificed herself and all her acts.

Now there was nothing left. The tide had gone out. Only sand remained.

Her memory reverted to the days of her childhood, her youth, her first and only love. All that had been shipwrecked in the stormy sea of life rose up again from the bed of dried-up waters. Familiar spectres climbed the sides of the abyss, like phantoms of the drowned that rise up by night and cling to the sides of the cliffs. She thought she heard the voices of

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her loved ones, which many a long day had not echoed in the depths of her memory.

Where were those whose call she thought she heard?

Were they not shadows, crying out to her, begging for remembrance?

For life was more insecure and perilous than it had ever been, and people could have none but anxious thoughts.

An unreasoning terror gripped her heart, as she sat there alone with her grief, her sorrows. She was oppressed by a sense of grim foreboding. Where was Strozzi to-night, of all nights? There had been days, when his absence seemed to roll a stone from her heart. Now grim fear held her in his talons. The presage of disaster was in the air. The times in which she lived had moulded her life, her soul. There was something terrible in the slow march of events.

Vainly she had puzzled her brain, vainly she had exercised her ingenuity, to bring about a meeting with Zuan, to learn the truth from his own lips. To break through the magic circle, within which Strozzi had banned her, hardly the spell of a sorcerer would have succeeded.

Had her gaoler deceived her after all?

Perchance Zuan's miraculous return to Venice had for its goal herself! Perchance he was straining every nerve to come to her, to snatch her from her fate. She had not dared to return his gaze as his gondola veered near her own, the gondola that held, beside himself, the hired assassin. One glance and he whom she loved best on earth would have dyed crimson the water of the canal with his life's blood.

Had he divined the danger, as their gondolas drifted apart? Was there design in the manœuvre that brought his gondola near Yaga's pavilion?

As, one by one, the events of the days passed in shadowy review before her inner gaze, Fulvia's courage and determination slowly revived.

Not without a struggle would she accept defeat at the hands

of this Magyar wanton. Her beauty and daring had brought victory to Yaga, whenever she had entered the arena with a rival. Now, let Yaga look to herself!

She knew a death struggle was impending between them. Her revived pride goaded her to a decisive effort to win back the man she loved, though she knew that, once she accepted Yaga's challenge, she would require every weapon in a woman's armory. If, on a former occasion, she had thrown away her chance of supremacy, she was now resolved to make a fight for the forfeited advantage.

Fulvia looked out upon the dark and silent estuary. The stars, one by one, were coming out in the darkening sky. Night was falling, damp and warm.

A solitary gondola was entering the shadowy Rio, passing under the bridge that looks towards the Island of San Michéle, near the black *peaté*, putrefying along the corroded walls. It vanished in the shadows and was lost to sight.

From distant belfries, from San Lazzarro, from San Cassiano, from San Giovanni è Paolo, from Santa Maria degli Miracoli, from Santa Maria del Pianto, from San Simeoné Propheta, floated the chimes of the Angelus.

Fulvia shuddered.

Like some exiled thing she was left alone in this dark, gloomy palace, enclosed by its girdle of water.

She was under the spell of the hour of dusk, when evil things stir and come to life.

She trembled. A stream that seemed to flow from a glacier submerged her, chilled her from the roots of her hair to the tips of her fingers. The frantic state of unrest claimed her once more.

The estuary was lost in darkness. The City of the Sea was kindled by the twilight fires. Other bells joined in the clangor of adoration. From the island churches faint echoes floated over the darkening waters of the lagunes.

What was her future life to be?

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Life that was given to other women for happiness and freedom, for love and tears and laughter, for the sanctification of pain in the joy of that eternal whisper, joining generation to generation round the hemisphere — Love was for all but herself, Love the Master, Love the Servant, Love the Inspiration, Love the Crown.

What was there now?

The convent walls, as her only refuge, seemed to beckon. It is easy to renounce the world, when there is nothing to renounce.

As in a vision she beheld herself in a convent cell.

A sort of ecstatic alchemy was changing her unhappy self into impersonal adoration. She had never thought of her wan, weak fingers bruising themselves on the bars, her own longing heart shut in the narrow cell, but ranging throughout the world. There could, after all, be but one logical fulfilment of her warped destiny.

From San Mauro and from San Erasmo, from San Giobbe and from Santa Maria dell' Orto the bells continued to peal.

A strange inertia was creeping over her, like a presage of evil. All around her seemed mist and waste and ashes.

There was something afoot in Venice. The secret dread that filled the hearts of the people had communicated itself to the lone occupant of the Strozzi palace.

To return to Arbé — to end her life by the site of its silent, shadowy waters!

What was she doing here?

She was lost! Still living, yet humiliated, overthrown, wounded as if she had been pitilessly trodden under foot. She was still living, loving, and new dawns were rising, fresh tides flowing into the City of the Sea.

In her absorbed state of mind she had not noted that the room, despite the candles, had grown dark.

To-night she dreaded darkness above all else, as if invisible phantoms stalked the gloom.

Unconsciously she turned and gave a start.

Was it an hallucination, a trick of her overwrought imagination? Had not the dark curtain, screening the door that led into the corridor, stirred, as if touched by a passing breath?

"Who is there?" her voice shivered through the silence.

There came no answer and she repeated the question in a tone shrilled by fear.

The curtain slowly parted, admitting Stiatta, her gaoler.

Brave as Fulvia was, at the sight of this creature her courage almost forsook her. Stiatta's face gave no clear indication of his purpose or intentions, but the face itself was enough to inspire her with a deadly terror at this hour.

Stiatta treated his captive with an almost exaggerated deference. Shadow-like he flitted about the palace, emerging mysteriously from unexpected niches, slipping from behind the arras in Fulvia's chamber and vanishing, silent and furtive, as he had come.

All day long had she been aware of some one's hidden presence. She had attributed this spying upon her to some new whim of her gaoler.

Strozzi was away and she was alone with Stiatta, for the servants were in another part of the palace.

Knowing the danger of betraying fear, she regarded the sinister shape steadfastly, trying to suppress a shudder.

The flesh seemed to have melted away from the face and Stiatta's features stood out in bony relief, like the knotted veins of a withered leaf. Beneath his brows the hollow arches looked like two great rings from which the stones had fallen. The irises had almost vanished into the whites of his eyes which, sunk in deep shadows, looked like the pale water that glimmers faintly in some cave. Stiatta's discolored lips shivered ceaselessly.

He looked like a half-killed corpse dragging itself towards its own grave.

"Stiatta!" she murmured, just to say something.

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"The lady Fulvia called?" came the reply and still he stood there, his gaze upon the beautiful apparition before him.

"Has the lord Strozzi returned?" she queried, accepting the proffered cue, even though she knew he lied.

Stiatta turned his head as if to make sure that the door behind him was closed.

"My lord has not returned," he made reply, as slowly advancing, he turned his head to right and left as one who has heard a sound but knows not whence it comes.

"What do you desire?" she fixed him with her gaze, trying to hide her fear.

"I came to warn my lady," he replied, creeping closer and closer, as if he dreaded lest his utterance might be overheard by some invisible presence.

"To warn me, good Stiatta?" she repeated, with enforced calm. "Of whom?"

"Of one who never threatens in vain," Stiatta replied with a meaning gesture.

"But," she continued, shivering despite the warm night air, "what is it I have to fear? What can I suffer that I have not suffered before?"

"Ah!" Stiatta cringed. "My lady does not know. There are hidden terrors within these walls that would cause a strong man to tremble and to flinch. How much more a woman."

He paused before Fulvia, the black wells of his eyes riveted upon her face, as if he wished to stamp every line of it upon his memory.

"I know there are strange contrivances in the palace, Stiatta," she said, holding up with an effort under the terror that was upon her. "But how do they concern me?"

Stiatta gave a snarl, a characteristic sound with him.

"That is what every one says! And in the end they believe it, too."

Fulvia hardly heard him. With lightning swiftness the thoughts were whirling through her brain. How was she to

save herself from this monster, if he chose to attack her? Her cries for help could not be heard through the thickness of the walls.

In time she remembered a small chased dagger of Damascus steel which had stood her in good stead before. Her hand went to her bosom. It was there! She had long learned to protect herself. Nevertheless she receded a step away from him.

With feline gait he followed.

She fixed him with her eyes, though a deadly fear clutched at her heart.

Ere she could speak he had hurled himself at her feet.

His lips touched the tips of her sandals.

She drew back, an icy shudder pervading her body.

Immediately she realized her danger.

Stiatta looked up, as a dog whom the foot of his master has spurned, his lips parted in a snarl, his eyes blood-shot. The next moment she felt his arms encircling her knees. She could not have moved had she tried to do so. She wanted to cry out. The voice died in her throat.

'He was gasping, a ghastly thing to behold.

"Is there nothing — nothing — that I can do to merit the favor of the Lady Fulvia?"

An icy hand clutched at her heart in the revelation that came to her like a lightning flash in the dark.

The wretch was infatuated with her beauty.

God,— the degradation! Must she drain the poison goblet to its very dregs?

One glimpse showed her the abyss.

With a superhuman effort she steeled herself to meet the danger. Her white, strong hands were clenched convulsively. She felt she must strangle this vile thing that was grovelling at her feet. Stiatta knew that Strozzi would not return. He had timed his boldness accordingly.

"How beautiful is the lady Fulvia!" his voice came in

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hoarse gasps, as again his lips touched the tips of her sandals.
"Beautiful as the angels!"

Was this one of Strozzi's unutterable designs? Was he trying to convict her of some monstrous attachment to this fawning beast, in order to justify such retaliation as he had in mind? The brazenness of Stiatta seemed too amazing.

Come what may, she must be on her guard.

"Would you be my friend indeed, Stiatta?" she smiled down upon him, obeying some strange inspiration that put the words into her mouth.

"Ah! Donna Fulvia!" gasped the creature at her feet.
"Put me to the test! For the least token of your favor I would kill the devil who tramples such beauty under foot."

He paused. Fulvia shivered at what she read in the look that met her own, hatred, lust, passion. The situation with its horror and dread was becoming unbearable. She felt as if she must shriek even though her outcry would be but the signal of her doom.

"I need a friend indeed," she temporized and beneath the level monotone of her words, back of the even manner with which she met the dread danger, there spoke unutterable fear. "Will you earn my gratitude, Stiatta?"

"Ay — and more!" stammered the monster. "How beautiful is the lady Fulvia! And her liege lord is even now encompassing her death."

"My death?" she repeated, hardly above a whisper.

"But I shall save you," Stiatta stammered, choked with his own passion, raising his blood-shot eyes to her. "I shall save the most beautiful woman in Venice, I shall —"

His form stiffened suddenly, his arms released her knees, he fell prone upon the floor and the words died on his lips.

The sudden change in Stiatta's manner struck Fulvia, ignorant as she was of its cause, with even graver import than did his former frenzy. From the writhing creature, whose foam-flecked lips stammered some incoherent words, her

gaze wandered to the curtain, that was slightly stirring, as if touched by a chance breath from without.

Bracing herself with a supreme effort to face this new horror, she shook herself free of the whining creature and, approaching the curtain, jerked it aside with a swift movement of her trembling hand.

Was it Strozzi's shadow that was vanishing down the corridor?

Something passed her.

Stiatta staggered from the chamber.

Fulvia was alone.

CHAPTER VI

THE MASTER OF THE SNOW



IN one of the secluded chambers of the arsenal, before an ebony table, there sat a man, masked and garbed in black from head to toe, bending over a chart which he was scrutinizing minutely. Three Leopards Rampant stood out in crimson relief against the sable hues of his tunic. The subdued light of a lamp of bronze, suspended from the fluted ceiling, fell upon a countenance so rigid that, to the casual observer, it might have seemed a waxen figure, dressed in the garb of the living and mimicking their pursuits.

The chamber contained no windows. Daylight never entered here. The walls were of wood, stained purple. The far wall was hidden by a huge iron chest, containing rolls of vellum, charts and documents. The doors were concealed by hangings of the same mournful hue as the woodwork. On two opposite sides of the wall there were closets, which might have been what they seemed, or secret passages leading into other chambers of the arsenal.

Deep, sepulchral silence reigned, while the lone occupant of the chamber concluded his examination.

He then rose and struck a gong.

Seemingly from nowhere there appeared one of the dark-robed familiars of the State Inquisition.

His mode of entrance would have puzzled the most adroit, for neither a door nor a panel in the wall opened to admit him.

Without a word the masked occupant of the chamber placed in his hand a tablet and the servant of the Secret Tribunal disappeared, soundlessly as he had come.

After a time there came a knock, repeated twice in succession.

So strange and perverse were the acoustics of the chamber, that the uninitiated would have been puzzled to locate its source.

The masked occupant of the chamber walked straight to the wall, and touched a hidden spring.

A panel slowly receded and a second muffled shape entered the chamber and stood at attention. The displacement of the panel revealed another chamber beyond, the character of which would have proved anything but mirth-inspiring to a chance visitor.

In the brief space of time between the opening and closing of the panel there was revealed a rack, amidst other instruments of torture, among which stood an African slave. In his hand he held a metal ball with whose peculiar construction he toyed with the interest of one who is examining a novel and ingenious mechanism.

It was, in fact, a gag of improved workmanship which, being thrust in the mouth of the person about to undergo the question, was, by a turn of the key, made to enlarge to triple its size, thereby holding the sufferer's jaws distended and preventing an outcry. Adjoining the rack there was visible, for the brief space of a moment, the ominous armchair, above which, at a proper elevation, was placed the celebrated helmet which was the invention of Venice for summary execution.

In it the head of the condemned was encased and, at a signal, a turn of the wrench drove a long, sharp bolt of steel into the base of the brain, severing the spinal column and causing instantaneous death.

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Then, for the first time, a voice shook the silence of the room into shuddering anxiety, as the occupant of the chamber turned to the Chief of the Signori di Notte.

"Has the prisoner confessed?"

"A hardened knave. It required three wrenches to make him pliable. We have his full confession."

"Give it to me!"

For a time silence prevailed, deep and unbroken, then the inexorable voice spoke again. It was hard as steel.

"The channel between Brondolo and Malamocco was left unguarded last night. A gondola bound from San Pietro in Castello to Tre Porti passed San Lazzaro shortly after midnight, doubled on its course and returned at daybreak. It carried a message from one high in the councils of Venice to an Arbesian galley, anchored in the straits."

The Chief of the Signori di Notte stood first on one foot then on the other. He was apparently ill at ease.

"My men report they saw nothing save a Ragusan fishing boat or two, and three *trabacoli* south-bound from Trieste, or Pola. There was a *mistrale*."

"I did not summon you to learn what I already know," came the stern reply. "You are guilty of gross neglect and your life should pay the penalty. Were Venice not better served than by your men, then were she in sore straits indeed. This paper—" with these words the speaker produced a scroll, which he held up to the astonished Chief, "contains the names of those who, tempted by the same reward, are equally concerned about the destinies of Venice."

The Chief of the sbirri gave an audible gasp.

"And this too is known to you, my lord?" he exclaimed aghast.

"Small thanks to you and your men."

"My lord, you know the inevitable squabbles between the sbirri and the arsenalotti; especially after a regatta, when they champion opposite sides. The Nicolotti won the race."

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"Are the destinies of Venice to be swayed by the moods of your rabble, who neglect to keep proper guard and to obey the orders of their superiors? A change of air and the diet of the *piombi* will cool their ardor. Are the names contained in this scroll known to you?"

"Pardon, my lord, the confession of the prisoner —"

"Which means you do not know them," the stern voice interposed.

"Neither does the wretch who swore to the truth of his confession," the Chief of the Sbirri replied, desperately.

"Therein at least did he not perjure himself."

"How do we know, my lord?"

"He, they acknowledge their chief, does not intend to repeat the fatal error of Marino Faliero."

"Why then, my lord, was he to be the goat of atonement?"

"I did not choose him from among his compeers to enjoy his society or to learn what I already know," came the reply.

"Then it was yourself, my lord, who sent him into the conspirators' camp?"

"Now you seem to reveal a gleam of human understanding, Ser Capitano," the voice replied. "Your men snatched him too soon from the burning pile. Nevertheless, this much I know. Among them appears the name of a woman who is exceeding fair to gaze upon and ready to go as far as any man. You know the name of that woman?"

"You would not put her to the question, my lord?" the Captain of the sbirri replied aghast.

"I should gain nothing thereby," came the sardonic reply.

"Most women are born liars. The moving spirit of the pageant still escapes us. And I mean to do him honor, to his heart's content."

There was a pause, during which the Chief of the sbirri stood first on one foot then the other.

"Your men are watching a certain palace in the Rio del Carmine?" the voice resumed its questioning rounds.

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"All who come and go are known to us."

"Tell me, then, who seems the favored one?"

"The lord Strozzi's gondola waits nightly at the woman's door."

"Michelé Steno's epigram should please the Ban. Is he at her house to-night?"

"There are three with her to sup. Two wear the Ban's livery. Why not surround the palace and take them, now and here?"

"In which case the Signori di Notte would no doubt be able to vouch for the safety of the other conspirators," came the sardonic reply.

"We cannot work miracles, my lord," stammered the Chief of the Signori di Notte.

"What are your plans?" drawled the voice.

"To post guards before the doors of those whose names are contained in yonder scroll."

"That they may work with greater safety inside? I do not intend to give them that pleasure."

The voice continued in a sterner tone.

"To-night the sandolo of the water police will guard the entrance of the Grand Canal. Scan all passing craft, but meddle with none. At midnight a strange gondola will appear upon the lagunes. Man every oar and track it to its lair."

"The devil himself, my lord, is abroad on the water," the Chief of the sbirri interposed.

"And if ten thousand devils were abroad, I will know its goal!"

"I speak not for myself, my lord," stammered the Chief of the sbirri. "But sailors are a superstitious lot."

"Then man the boat with the Dalmatians!"

There came a knock from one of the panels.

The black-robed form strode slowly towards the wall and touched a spring. The panel receded and closed. A letter was left in his hand.

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He cut the silken cord, unfolded it and read.

"A net has been drawn from Tre Porti to Brondolo, thence to Malamocco. Southeast of Pelestrina our men picked up a six-oared gondola headed for Arbé. They gave chase through the Canal of Lombardy. At Chioggia we captured our prize. A galley anchored outside the sea wall hoisted sail and went to sea."

There was a pause.

The Chief of the sbirri had listened with close attention to the words as they slowly fell from his superior's lips.

The latter turned to the Chief of the Signori di Notte.

"The ten thousand eyes of Argus would hardly suffice to guard the City of the Sea in this, her great extremity, enemies within and without, a disgruntled aristocracy, a panic-stricken people, a disaffected army. Remember your orders, Ser Capitano. Venice does not forgive twice. At midnight be at the mouth of the Grand Canal. I will know where the nightly horror that turns peoples' blood to water finds its dismal haven. And now summon the Master of the Arsenal and the Captain of the Dalmatians. San Marco is a hard taskmaster. Forget it not!"

The Chief of the Signori di Notte bowed himself obsequiously out of the dread presence and left the vaulted chamber to the possession of its dismal occupant, who resumed his seat and the study of the charts spread before him on the ebony table.

CHAPTER VII

THE RED MANTLE



THE trend of events, as far as they had touched his own life, had convinced Zuan that the curtain was about to rise, the play about to begin. The Armenian had vanished from Venice as if the earth had swallowed him. Yaga's words burnt in his brain. She had confirmed his suspicions. She had done more. She had sped the poison shaft that had pierced into his soul. Whence had she derived the intelligence denied to him?

With feverish anxiety he hurled himself into the very vortex of the maelstrom, in the frantic endeavor to unravel the web, to gather the scattered threads which he held, in his hands.

A great restlessness had invaded him, engendered by the very circumstance he would have otherwise welcomed, the absence of Strozzi.

Days had passed since Zuan and Strozzi had met.

Strangely enough the same panic had seized both at the same hour.

Vainly they trailed each other. It was a game of hide-and-seek, played on the great checkerboard of the Venetian Carnival, where two might stand side by side, yet stand unrevealed.

A legion of spies, let loose by both sides, seemed to prove equally unavailing and Strozzi, now thoroughly aroused to

the danger that threatened him within the precincts of his own palace, resolved upon desperate measures to check the unreasoning terror that invaded him.

Meanwhile every water avenue from Tre Porti to Malamocco was guarded by the barges of the secret police in the disguise of fishermen. Every message received from or intended for the outside world wandered into a certain chamber in the arsenal draped in purple from floor to ceiling.

So well were the secret forces organized that often one of their own familiars trailed the other, to prevent possible treason.

Zuan's efforts to trace Fulvia's abode had been unavailing.

Yet no effort was being spared. A legion of spies had been let loose. They pervaded every cloister, every palace. Upon the piazzas and the canals they held silent watch.

One familiar with the intricate machinery of the Venetian state might have noted an unusual activity in the arsenal and among the Signori di Notte. Outwardly everything seemed calm as before. The sandolo of the water police made its usual rounds and its usual arrests. Nothing gave hint of the fact that a volcano was smouldering beneath the City of the Sea, compared with which the Faliero conspiracy was a harmless masque festival.

One night Zuan found himself later than usual on the Piazza of San Marco. He had made his accustomed rounds, visited the booths of the clowns, the stalls of the hucksters and the tents of the gypsies. Then he had lost himself in the intricate labyrinth of alleys and lanes.

It was close on to midnight and again, as so often since his arrival, he had the sensation of someone trailing his footsteps.

Turning suddenly, he found himself face to face with a mask in a scarlet cloak, his face covered by a scarlet vizor. He resembled nothing so much as the executioner of Venice. So persistent were his attentions, that Zuan curtly demanded what was his business.

The scarlet one stopped.

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"Take care, my lord," he said in a guarded whisper.
"Nothing can be done to-night."

"Why not?" Zuan replied with quick presence of mind.

The scarlet one passed on without reply.

In three bounds Zuan was at his side and caught him by his cloak. To his sheer surprise the mantle remained in his hand and the stranger disappeared in the shadow of the tall houses that bordered the canal.

Utterly nonplussed by this untoward dénouement Zuan examined the cloak.

It was of costly material and bespoke his owner to be a man of quality, who evidently did not desire to have his identity revealed.

"Some intrigue, no doubt," he soliloquized, resolved to retain the garment, and on the following evening he was as usual on the Piazza, arrayed in the scarlet mantle and a high Phrygian cap.

All evening he roamed about, hoping to be accosted by some one who would claim the cloak and give him the clue to the mysterious message of the previous night. Time and again he traversed Piazza and Piazzetta, penetrated the dusky arcades of the ducal palace, stood on the steps of the Basilica and watched by the arch of the Clock Tower.

But, as if he were shunned of the living, no one would stop even long enough to exchange a gibe and, with a keen sense of disappointment, Zuan, leaving the crowded Piazza, sought the comparative quiet of the narrow lanes that meander from the arch of the Clock Tower towards the heart of Venice.

No sooner had he quitted the centre of Venetian gayety than the mystery of the Venetian night began to assert itself. Again Zuan had the sensation that some one was persistently trailing his footsteps.

At first he refused to obey the impulse that prompted him to turn.

Suddenly stopping, Zuan found himself face to face with a

hunchback, who was peering up into his face, as if to assure himself that he was addressing the one he intended to approach.

They were near the Ponte Mario and it was close on to midnight.

The region was utterly deserted of the living and Zuan relished his new acquaintance so little that his hand mechanically gripped the hilt of his poniard, when the hunchback, with a husky, rasping voice inquired if he were addressing the renowned doctor Zaleukos of Zakynthos, whose miraculous cures had set all Venice by the ears.

With rare presence of mind Zuan, whose disguise lent itself somewhat strangely to this interpretation of his profession, accepted the role cast upon him and asked the stranger in what way he could be of service.

The hunchback regarded him for a few moments in silence then, in his rasping voice, that jarred unpleasantly on Zuan's ear, he retorted:

"Follow me!"

"Follow you?"

The bat-like creature fixed him with a sardonic glance.

"If you are afraid, remain! The work that waits is not for a coward!"

Zuan turned upon him sternly.

"Be less lavish of your epithets, fellow!"

"There is no occasion for alarm," the hunchback replied, in a mollified tone. "I seek the services of a surgeon, not for one living, but one dead!"

Zuan gave a start.

This was somewhat more than he had bargained for.

"Explain yourself," he said, sparring for time.

The hunchback nodded grimly.

"I arrived with my mistress from Treviso, a day or two ago. She died suddenly and her family are resolved to take her from me to bury her, according to a custom of their house,

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in their ancestral vaults. I do not grudge them her body, but, by San Marco! Her head they shall not have, if I have to sever it from the body myself! It is for this I want you!"

"But why this mystery and at night?" Zuan turned to his interlocutor.

"To-morrow they will be here to claim her, Santissima Madre! Once the deed is done, it is done!"

Zuan pondered.

There was something in the hunchback's manner that gave him pause.

"I am not unskilled in matters of this sort," he said with an air of hesitation that remained not unremarked by the other. "But this is an unusual request and I carry no surgical instruments with me. If you will go with me to the inn where I dwell, I shall supply myself with what is needed."

He hoped the hunchback would consent. The tables would be turned and he would have him in his power.

But the bat-like creature remained obdurate.

"I cannot wait," he snarled, "and a thousand sequins are not picked up every day. Will you come or shall I seek farther?"

"I will go with you," Zuan replied.

"Yonder waits a gondola. I regret the necessity. But I must bandage your eyes."

Without waiting his consent, the hunchback produced a bandage, and, disregarding Zuan's protests, ordered him to lower his head. Then he bandaged his eyes so tightly that he could not have seen a light ray had there been a conflagration raging about him.

Zuan's guide led him to the gondola. They entered and the supple craft started at once.

The midnight hour boomed from all the churches and belfries of Venice. The gondola at last ran up to a landing. His guide led him over the slimy water-stairs to a door where they paused.

Zuan thought he heard the sound of receding oars and a strange misgiving filled his heart. But so intent was he upon the business awaiting him, that he stifled his fears. What harm could come to him, Zaleukos, the Greek physician, who had cured so many ills in the City of the Sea?

It seemed a postern, before which they waited the response to the summons of his guide, the goal of their nocturnal journey. Now he heard the grating sound of a key. The door swung slowly inward and, in obedience to the warning of his guide, he lowered his head, so as not to strike the low ceiling of the corridor.

Through a passage seemingly interminable they made their way, up and down several flights of stairs. No doubt it was an abode of some pretensions and magnificence, for the heavy pile of a carpet swallowed the steps and a faint odor of incense floated to Zuan's nostrils.

Now they stood before a door and waited.

Not a word had been spoken since Zuan had entered the gondola with his strange companion, who now removed the bandage from his eyes, while he drew him simultaneously into a dimly lighted chamber, lofty and warm and floored with exquisite tiling.

It was furnished sumptuously and was filled with flowers in great profusion, which stood about in great jars of gorgeous eastern coloring.

Zuan's gaze wandered from his masked companion to a curtained recess which contained a bed.

The hunchback turned aside, as if endeavoring to hide his tears and emotions. With a mute gesture he pointed towards the bed and whispered to Zuan to do his business quickly and well. Then he quitted the chamber with its dead and its flowers and its incense, after placing a long, gleaming knife in Zuan's hand.

The latter shuddered as he turned the deadly instrument in his hands.

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What deed of mystery was he about to commit?

Trusting to chance he had impersonated the great Greek doctor, hoping to stumble upon some hidden clue. Now he was here, in this sombre palace, in this dusky chamber, whose atmosphere was freighted with the odor of death and incense, facing a mystery as baffling as the one he had been pitted against since that eventful night in the past.

He said to himself, there was no time to lose. The blood money must be earned, the task fulfilled. His employer might momentarily return. Perchance at the last moment some escape from the dilemma would present itself. In the meantime he must prepare himself for his ghastly task.

Who was the dead woman? Was she young? Was she beautiful? The devotion prompting the extraordinary request seemed to hold out promise of the latter.

With hushed steps Zuan approached the dark curtain which screened the bed. His trained ear caught a sound as of some one entering a door on tiptoe.

The blood froze in his veins, as, midways, he stopped, looking about with bated breath.

Everything was still as death, nor could he perceive any other presence in the chamber save his own.

Attributing the sensation to a trick of his overwrought imagination, he now swiftly approached the bed, testing the blade, shuddering as his fingers glided along the razor-like edge.

Irresolute he paused for a moment before the curtains, then with trembling fingers he drew aside the heavy folds, resolved to see, but not to do that for which he had come.

The face of the corpse was turned away from him. In the dim half light that filled the shadowy recess, his hand touched the silken hair of the woman and a strange shiver quivered through his frame.

Suddenly, under the touch of his fingers, a convulsion passed through the body of the corpse. The head slowly turned, the eyes of the dead woman opened.



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Zuan felt a hand of steel upon his shoulder. A voice hissed into his ear.

“Strike!”

A terrible scream rang through the chamber, in which his own voice strangely joined.

Ere he knew what happened, the floor gave way beneath his feet.

Another cry followed his own, as he plunged through interminable darkness.

CHAPTER VIII

THE POOL OF DEATH



ONE moment in light, the next in darkness, down through the gloom of the pit, plumb as a hurled rock, and swift as an arrow, the betrayed man fell.

The swiftness of his descent took from him all thought or sensation. His flight was suddenly terminated by a subterranean pool of water into the oily depths

of which he sank for a moment, then rose to the surface.

The chilled element, together with an unconquerable stench that assailed his nostrils, restored Zuan to sensation and feeling.

Spreading his arms instinctively outward, in an attitude of swimming, Zuan could neither guess where he was nor who had sent him to his doom. His thoughts were wandering and confused as are the thoughts of a man who dreams while half asleep and half awake.

The trap through which he had shot had closed above him almost as quickly as it had been released, and so dense was the opaque gloom, that he could not distinguish an object nor gain the faintest clue as to where he was.

He was spitting the filthy, slimy liquid from his mouth, fighting down the black terror that gripped him by the throat, terror of the darkness, of the unknown depths, of the stifling stench, the lapping tidal water.

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But even in this terrible suspense and death-agony his thoughts turned to Fulvia, to the terrible mystery with which he had stood at last, face to face.

His plight was indeed desperate. His garments clung to him with the weight of a steel armor, pulling him down, down, and though he tried frantically to divest himself of the deadly encumbrance, he required the aid of both arms to remain above water.

He must live — live to save Fulvia from some incalculable doom, even if he had to face anew all the horrors of hell, and the fiend, from whose clutches a perhaps worse fate had saved him.

Swimming through the stagnant tide, Zuan cast his eyes overhead and discerned, far, far above, a faint twinkling light, like a dim and distant star. The next moment it was gone. Around, above and beneath was darkness, darkness which no eye could pierce, darkness almost tangible in its density.

The air, heavy with dampness and mist, seemed as dead and stagnant as the waters in which he swam.

The light, glimmering for an instant far above, vaguely recalled to Zuan's mind the person of the hunchback who had brought him to this pass.

And then he thought his terrible plunge was but a dream, and, splashing and plunging in the oily waters, he sought to shake off the fearful nightmare that stiffened his sinews and froze his blood.

His extended hand touched a cold and slimy substance, and a small, bright spot shone like a fiery coal through the darkness. He grasped the thing. A noisome reptile wriggled in his hand.

Now it was he became aware that the subterranean waters were peopled by crawling serpents, that writhed round his legs, twined about his body, touched his face at every moment. He struck out with hand and foot. Their bright eyes sparkled in the pool, their hissing broke upon the air, as they found

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themselves thus disturbed by the presence of a strange visitor.

Zuan was no coward, nor was he given to strange fancies. But a feeling of intense terror chilled his very blood, a fear that there might be no escape from this pool of death.

As these thoughts crept through the confused mind of the man who was vainly striving to gain a foothold, he gave utterance to a faint outcry.

It was returned back to him in a hundred echoes, swelling one after the other; now, like the sound of repeated claps of thunder, and again dying away fainter and yet fainter, as though the voices of the drowned were engaged in hushed and whispered conversation.

Striking his arms boldly through the water Zuan strove to gain some rock or other object, upon which he might rest his body. He tried to scream.

The mephitic odors seemed to choke his voice. Vaguely he acknowledged to himself the futility of his efforts. Who was there to hear him? Would those who had willed his death come to the rescue? What fiend of hell had invented this thing on some burning pillow of anguish? What demon in human guise had lured him to kill that which he loved best on earth?

What sort of abode was this, which enclosed the woman who had gone out of his life, whose memory had haunted his waking hours and his dreams? Their eyes had met at the regatta. Death stood behind him and she had vouchsafed him no glance of recognition. Who was the man at her side, who had whispered words of endearment into her ear? Who was the master of this abode, the devil whose cunning exceeded the wiles of the fiend?

Between these flashes of thought, he continued his struggle.

His saturated garments of which he had been unable to divest himself were dragging him down like a suit of mail. His chest was aching dully, his veins throbbing to bursting. He forced tired muscles to work and every stroke was agony.

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He must make one supreme effort. Everything for which he had endured, suffered, was at stake. Fulvia lived — but how? Was she here of her own choice? What place was this? Who was the fiend who had brought him hither?

The clammy horror of the pit almost deprived Zuan of his senses. Thunderous noises rang in his ears. His eyes showed him crimson visions of woeful shapes, as the blood rushed, leaping to his brain. Strange voices cried to him as with the greeting of the doomed.

It was a terrible struggle, a battle with death, waged by one whom the finger of death had touched. Minutes passed. Consciousness seemed blotted out.

Everything Zuan did was done upon the impulse of habit. His agonizing struggle to come up again from that foul, oily tide and breathe the air, though ever so poison laden, were the dictates of a nature resolved to live.

He knew the spark of tortured life that had flickered up once more must soon become extinct forever, in this dull, leaden stillness, filled with the vapors of death, when his hands came in contact with a solid substance. Testing it in the darkness he found it would offer a secure foothold.

With an exertion of his remaining strength Zuan gripped the stone ledge, clambered up and alighted on a large, chiseled slab laid in horizontal position. Over this was placed another but smaller rock of like form. Continuing his explorations, Zuan found with a wild beating of the heart that a sort of rude stairway rose in front of him.

With a final, desperate effort he drew himself up, striking his head against the low arch overhead.

The blow seemed to act as a counter-agent to the effect of the foul, mephitic air that filled the cavern. Zuan was awake and aware. His torch and flints being utterly useless owing to their contact with the water, he extended a groping hand. The stone ledge seemed to form a shelf in the cavern and would doubtlessly lead to some exit whatever purpose it served.

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Drawing himself up on hand and foot like some crawling thing of the noisome element below, Zuan found his expectations realized.

A narrow slit in the wall promised egress from this cavern of death, and Zuan found himself in a narrow passage, that seemed to wind through the bowels of the earth and the extent of which, in the absence of any light, he could not even surmise.

Setting one foot before the other with utmost caution, his arms extended before him, Zuan groped along the wall, which was covered with a white poison moss, repellent to the touch.

With a return of the deadly nausea he had experienced a short while ago, Zuan paused, leaning for support against the wall.

Would the passage that was to lead him to freedom never end? Would he succumb to the deadly exhalations after having escaped death in the water?

Desperately resolved he staggered on and his perseverance was at last rewarded. A breath of heaven's own air, wafted into the dismal passage from somewhere, apprised him that he was near the outlet from this death trap.

Rising to his feet in his wet, clinging garments, Zuan looked dazedly about. His hand passed over his brow as if he were waking from some terrible nightmare.

The region was desolate and deserted and offered no clue to the place from which he had escaped.

Night was weaving her phantom veils about the great estuary of San Marco. The Pleiades hung above the belt of Orion, Aldebaran raging crimson to the left, a fiery point upon the nocturnal waters.

Not a living thing met his gaze.

A sea-bird screamed harshly, as it rose from a reedy morass and veered round a lonely campanile.

Over the stagnant marshes wandering marsh-lights flitted to and fro like the ghosts of those deadly fires which had, so long ago, embraced in one long death-agony the cities of Alt-

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num and Aquileia, whose adjoining sites abide in the same desolation as forsaken Torcello.

An eerie sound, weird, unspeakably sinister, like the cry of the Banshee, broke the death-like stillness and died away over the distant sea-moors.

A weird, elusive flame was rising and falling somewhere in the night, like a signal waved by demon hands.

The air was fragrant with the odor of wild thyme and the shrubbery showed like a black island in a green sea.

In a deserted fisher's hut Zuan spent the night.

Fulvia's anguished cry echoed in his ears and despairingly he raised his eyes to heaven with the silent question: "How long? How long?"

CHAPTER IX

THE SPIDER'S WEB



THE day was dying.

Like a round vermillion ball the sun sank into the plains of Lombardy. The west broke into a labyrinth of fire. Its splendors scaled the fretted clouds, stealing along the purple caverns of dusk, till the whole dome of heaven seemed to throb.

The great lagune, the silent sea, above which Venice towered, began to waken to life and, when the sun's last rays had flamed themselves to death in the plains of Padua, a slow moon disentangled itself from the indigo night-sky.

In a dusky chamber of his gloomy palace Strozzi was fretfully perambulating, pausing now and then before a deep embrasured window that looked out upon the stagnant waters of the canal. The walls were covered with a gloomy tapestry in which could be faintly traced the faded figures of Virgin and Child. Wolf skins were spread upon the marble floor. From the coffered ceiling depended a bronze chandelier.

Those who knew Strozzi apparently care-free and indifferent to the hazards of life, would have had difficulty in recognizing him on this evening. The face, ghastly pale and passion distorted, the sunken eyes, gleaming as with a subdued fever, the nervous stride — all these symptoms gave testimony that matters had not gone as well with him as he might desire.

Might made right in his world, and might, though insistent on its own rectitude, was apt to resent comment and opposition, whether open or concealed. His thoughts were busy with many schemes; he knew himself and his power. He had only to stretch out his hand to take and, having taken, to hold. Venice first, then storm-tossed Padua, the whole of Lombardy next, then his name should go down to posterity as the *tyrannus in excelsis*.

His plans were well laid. The whole fabric of the state had been honeycombed by his creatures. It must crumble into its native dust once the earthquake he was setting into motion shook the foundations.

So far all was well. In his own house it was possibly worst. There his mastery ended. There he met with a silent opposition which no trick of persuasion seemed able to overcome.

Fulvia had locked herself in her chamber and her temper was such as to cause even Strozzi to consider discretion the better part of valor.

Her silence caused him the gravest concern. He could have borne her reproach, her anger, even her rebuke. But this sepulchral silence boded ill and he felt his passion slowly crumbling to dead ashes. He surprised himself upon a trend of thought that gave him pause. He had intended that both should die — and now!

By some trick of the fiend she had waked from her narcotic sleep just as Zuan, hypnotized and not master of himself, had raised his arm for the fatal stroke. And, as if one mishap had drawn another in its wake, Stiatta had prematurely released the trap.

Directly it had closed above Zuan, Fulvia had fallen in a swoon, from which the combined efforts of those working with her had been unable to rouse her. Towards evening she had regained consciousness, yet without betraying a trace of memory of the happenings of the night. Later she drove every one from her presence and had remained invisible ever since

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Strozzi continued his restless perambulation.

Within the hour disquieting tidings had reached his ear, tidings that caused him to curse his evil star for the failure of a scheme which Satan himself might have sponsored and inspired.

Zuan's body had not been found.

All day long Strozzi's creatures had dragged their nets.

Their efforts had been but meagrely repaid by the discovery of a red mantle and a Phrygian cap, floating on the black surface of the stagnant pool.

Futile were Strozzi's ravings; futile his threats.

He sent those who brought the ill tidings scurrying back to their task; yet every new effort returned the same reply. Zuan had miraculously escaped. Yet even those who for a time remained above water succumbed eventually to the poison gasses in which not even plants hostile to human life could survive.

Not a rat could escape from this pool of hell.

How was it possible for his body to have disappeared as if the fiend who stalked through the subterranean vaults had carried it off?

How he hated this insolent who, defying his own good offices, refused to die, this intruder upon his just and inalienable birthright, this human derelict, who had reconquered at a glance not only the lost domain, but new zones as well, for Fulvia's love seemed to have grown in proportion to the dangers and obstacles that beset her path, heedless of the dark tales he poured into her ear.

Dared he trust no longer to his star?

The day was drawing near when his triumph would be complete, when the Magyar king would declare war on the Republic, the Ban seize the Dalmatian Isles, when a Genoese fleet commanded by Admiral Doria, now anchored off the Liparian Isles, would appear before Chioggia, when he would overthrow this hated oligarchy and be the master of Venice

— no shadowy ruler like the Gradenigo, a king, with Yaga the beautiful, his queen.

Meanwhile none of his messengers had returned, and vainly Strozzi tried to fathom the cause.

Pausing in his perambulation, he gave a start as he caught a glimpse of his own face in the bronze mirror on the wall. In the lugubrious half-light it was even more drawn and haggard than it appeared by the light of day.

He had spent much time in the company of his astrologer, but the horoscope had proved unsatisfactory. Want of sleep was telling on him. Age, too, was beginning to show upon his face. Superficially, it was still the same pale, close-shaven, inscrutable mask. But the lines of thought and cruelty had graven themselves more deeply. It was an older, a sterner, a more wicked face.

He walked up and down, his hands crossed behind his back.

Were his own terrors turning upon him?

Often of late, a strange feeling had possessed him, as if some one were ever at his side, as if the secret power that watched over the destinies of Venice had suddenly waked from its petrified sleep and was listening, watching, waiting.

What was this phantom that impregnated the very air with its presence? His own spies had watched night after night before the lightless arsenal and their reports had strangely agreed. Whoever held forth therein had summoned as his ally a power resisted by few, Night and Fear.

And he about whose feet murder's streams were flowing stood appalled before that intangible intelligence that surrounded him, like the dark stream of the nether world.

Surely some demon had wrested his own most potent weapon from him and turned the edge upon his lord and master.

In that hour another plan had slowly matured in his mind.

Yaga's presence in Venice had, for a time, caused him grave concern. Her utter fearlessness and indifference to

danger, from whatever source it threatened, would in the end prove their undoing. His scheme, to embroil Zuan in her nets, had suffered defeat and, as he knew Yaga, she would never consent to leaving Venice until she had been revenged for the rebuff she had received at his hands.

Pausing, he gazed at the ceiling as if the dark thought that flashed through his mind had its birth in that shadowy region. He might dispose of Fulvia and the beautiful Magyar at one stroke, and his conscience, even had it been more tender, would have absolved him of any share in their undoing. Yaga would fly at the opportunity of meeting her rival and, once face to face in a locked chamber, a duel to the death would be inevitable. As he knew Fulvia, she would leap at Yaga's challenge. They would destroy each other.

A baleful light gleamed in his eyes.

His senses had long been lust-bitten by the beauty of this Magyar wanton.

Why not make Yaga his own and send Fulvia to the Ban? What demon whispered the thought into his ear?

Since Fulvia had spurned his love, she should drink the poison goblet to the dregs. The Ban's method of wooing was somewhat at variance with his own, as she should discover, to her cost. And Zuan would be lost to her forevermore.

The sudden inspiration seemed to stimulate Strozzi's lagging energies. He nodded to himself as the thought took form.

"There is a freak of dark fantastic fun which I mean to play upon my gentle Fulvia, before we send her up to her winged friends in Paradise. I shall pave her way to heaven. But she shall leave her wits on earth."

He struck the gong that summoned his henchman to his presence.

It had grown quite dark in the room. A dank air arose from the waters of the canal, like the odor of death. The placid light of the higher risen moon seemed like a rebuke to the

turbulent passions that stirred the City of the Sea to her very foundations.

Ere Strozzi was aware of his presence, Stiatta stood in the chamber.

"You are one of those velvet-footed hounds that are everywhere and nowhere," Strozzi turned to the mishapen knave, trying to cloak his chagrin at his noiseless appearance in an outburst of anger. "Whence come you?"

"Like Messer Satanasso, I come from wandering up and down the face of the earth, when I heard my lord's summons. So I entered —" Stiatta replied with a strange leer.

"Ever at my beck," Strozzi interposed luridly.

"I am a man without price, my lord," Stiatta permitted himself the luxury of a smile that gleamed upon his features like phosphorus upon a skull.

"A man without price is he whom no one pays."

"Yet I swear by my dead mother, and that is an oath I have never yet broken."

"It is the only one then," Strozzi interposed impatiently.

"How fares Donna Fulvia?"

By the dim light of the flickering taper Strozzi could not see the expression in the castellan's face, which twitched strangely.

"The Lady Fulvia has immured herself in her chambers and has driven everybody from her presence," Stiatta replied with a grin as if he were treating the ears of his master to an uncommonly facetious incident.

"Indeed," Strozzi replied meditatively, apparently without heeding Stiatta's leer. "Can you, Stiatta, you who know so much, venture a surmise, why Donna Fulvia persists in so inhospitable a mood?"

Stiatta gave a shrug.

"He, who would fathom Donna Fulvia's moods, would indeed be accounted one of the seven wise men."

"Too much wisdom engenders death," Strozzi interposed sardonically.

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"The Lady Fulvia vouchsafes no clue."

Strozzi regarded his factotum for a moment or two in silence. Stiatta, standing first upon one foot then the other, was visibly uncomfortable under his master's scrutiny.

"See that she wants for nothing," Strozzi spoke at last, "and summon a gondola!"

Stiatta bowed and disappeared.

A few moments later Strozzi entered the *felzè* of the waiting boat which, under the boatman's practiced stroke, sped into mid-channel, like a bird on the wing.

The canal was deserted. It was, like an ancient river, full of poetry and silence. The indigo night-sky was mirrored in its depths with its myriad stars.

Strozzi urged the gondolier to increased speed.

A desperate impulse was driving him on. The patrician palaces with their roses and unicorns and emblematic designs frowned dark and silent like so many sepulchres. The boatman bent over the oar, spurred by that sudden impatience. The frail barque skimmed over the water. The canal was dark as the passage to the world of shadows.

Strozzi reiterated his command.

The canal seemed too narrow for his soul to breathe in. He felt the need for action as never before. The gondolier rowed with increased vigor. The rowlock creaked under his redoubled effort. The palace of the Cornaro and the palace of the Pesaro passed them like two opaque giants blackened by time as by the smoke of a conflagration. They passed under the Rialto with its silent shops and its odors of fish and cabbages. Between still, sleeping garden walls of brick and marble the gondola sped towards its goal.

They had passed the old monastery of Campo di San Bernardo. The blunt steeples of Santa Maria degli Angeli rose beyond it into the indigo night-sky and now the gondola turned into the silent estuary that surrounded like a pool of Lethé the cloisters of San Sepolcro.

Here Strozzi alighted and dismissed the gondolier.

The stars burnt in the narrow strip of sky above. In the distance could be heard the mournful lowing of the sea.

In obedience to a signal the low, iron-studded door swung slowly inward. A form resembling a huge bat evolved itself out of the gloom of the corridor and, facing his nocturnal visitor, bowed grotesquely.

Pulcio carried a lantern, which he could shade at will, and by its dim, fitful light the exaggerated shadows of the twain intermingled fantastically on the stone floor of the corridor.

In obedience to a silent nod the dwarf preceded his master down the narrow passage. Then by a succession of winding stairs and galleries they arrived in the subterranean corridors of the deserted cloisters. Bats flapped their way in and out the dusky passage. Pulcio's lantern afforded the only light in this night-wrapped labyrinth.

"Who are your chief prisoners?" Strozzi turned to the hunchback, as they made their descent into the gloomy vaults.

"I am not, I trow, to consider the lady Gulnare as such even though she be under the ban of the Holy Office?" Pulcio replied dubiously, with a side glance at his terrible master.

"That is, according to how I shall find her humor disposed," Strozzi returned curtly.

"My lord's orders are that she go and come unmolested?" the dwarf replied submissively.

"By which door does she come and go?"

"By the door your lordship entered."

"She passes your lodge?"

"My duties are manifold, my lord."

"Your eyes, I fear, grow dim?"

"They still perform their functions, my lord."

"You are keeping something from me."

"I cannot read the lady Gulnare's mind, my lord, but I can read her eyes," the dwarf replied. "And their set stare bodes ill for some one."

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"Ill?" Strozzi simulated surprise. "Surely, the lady Gulnare is not cast in that mould."

There was a strange glitter in Pulcio's eyes as he looked up at Strozzi slantwise.

"The women with the faces of saints are commonly the devil's very own."

"I commend your penetration, Pulcio," Strozzi interposed darkly, "Your knowledge of the sex is amazing. Who else enjoys your hospitality?"

"There is Malviso the secretary, who accidentally misdirected one of your lordship's letters."

"I remember! Where does he hold forth?"

"In the lowest range of galleries, below the sea-level. He curses and shrieks whenever the tide comes in and tries to crush his head against the wall."

"He is so hard-headed a knave he will impair the foundation," Strozzi replied sardonically. "Open the water van at dawn! It will soothe his nerves. Who lodges above?"

"Pambo, my lord, the priest who refused to grant you absolution."

Strozzi's lips straightened in a narrow thin line.

"Let Heaven whom he serves, grant him a better understanding, while we chasten the flesh. Have my orders been obeyed?"

A broad grin distorted Pulcio's features.

"Every noon hour, my lord, a fire is kindled in the space below, waxing gradually in heat unto the fires of hell itself, and making contact with the floor even to shod feet unendurable in the chamber above. Thus for the space of two hours daily Pambo is constrained to dance from one foot to the other, like any zany, the while the sweat pours down his sainted brow and in the end he sinks down with no more strength than a stalk of wilted grass."

The recital of the monk's gymnastics seemed to cause merriment to Strozzi.

"Does he dance like a very gamecock?" he laughed, and the unwonted sound re-echoed weirdly in the corridors. "Who would have thought the old bird was so agile! Let him leap a little higher, till he cracks his pate against the ceiling. What of Alidossi?"

"A sullen knave, my lord," Pulcio replied. "He will neither eat nor speak."

"Then give him to drink! There is enough water for all of us. But this place is very dark, Pulcio, and I should say we were somewhere near the haunted cell."

Pulcio made the sign of the cross.

"Have you seen it too, my lord? Well, they say the devil haunts this pile and though I have not seen him myself, I have certainly noted his presence. Whenever he comes he triples the length of these corridors."

"Lead on and cease your nursery babble," Strozzi interposed contemptuously. "What was that?" he added with a start.

A black shadow passed them in the narrow corridor, swift and soundless like a breath.

Strozzi started back and drew his dagger.

"Have you seen it too?" he turned to the dwarf.

The latter turned a frightened countenance to the questioner.

"If my lord would deign to spend the night under this roof he would see many things."

Strozzi had recovered himself.

"It was a woman! Ho, Pulcio, a woman!" he grasped the dwarf by the shoulder. "What say you to that?"

"My lord, all ghosts look black at night," Pulcio replied.

One of the sudden suspicions, natural to so dark a mind, suddenly flashed through Strozzi's brain. There was something afoot that fitted not into his scheme of things. Might not Pulcio at this very moment be leading him into ambushed assassination?

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Even ere the thought had found root in his brain he noted a dim glow at the end of the slowly ascending passage.

"Yonder light will guide me the rest of the way," he suddenly turned to the gaoler. "Return and resume your watch! And — should the foul fiend appear to you, bid him wait my return, that we may exchange confidences."

Pulcio almost doubled his misshapen body as he stepped aside to allow Strozzi to pass.

Pursuing his way along the dark corridor Strozzi proceeded with cautious steps and keen glances towards the point of radiance that glowed on the lofty walls, revealing in spots the granite foundation of the pile. As he did so, the apparition, doubling on its tracks, passed him again.

Like a bolt his arm shot out and his hand gripped bodily substance.

"Who goes there?"

The shape uttered a stifled groan and stood still.

A white face stared into his own. Two eyes met his own with steely glitter.

"You!"

The contempt that rang from Gulnare's lips caused Strozzi to start. For a moment it seemed to deprive him of utterance.

"Am I not welcome?"

"Welcome as the plague!"

Her look of scorn cut him to the quick.

Without vouchsafing him another glance she flew down the gloom of the gallery, Strozzi following in hot pursuit.

He caught up with her on the threshold of her chamber.

When the curtain had fallen behind them, she turned upon him like some wild creature at bay.

"Where is Marco?"

So sudden, so violent was the utterance, that he took a backward step.

"Am I your lover's keeper?" he returned, brutally.

"Perchance but his murderer."

She faced him like a fury, the face with its rare charm drained of every vestige of color.

"You are beside yourself, Gulnare," Strozzi spoke in a more conciliatory tone. "Whence so late?"

"I go and come as I please," she flashed. "Why are you here? Is there some new assignation to be kept?" Her voice grew tense in its terrible, hidden significance. "Is there some new victim to be lured to his death? Speak! Am I not arrayed to dazzle and to kill?"

Strozzi squirmed under the level scrutiny of these accusing eyes.

"I swear to you only my anxiety brought me to your abode to-night," he said, trying to pacify her. "There was murder neither in my mind nor in my heart, Gulnare."

"It was the first time, then," she flashed.

He raised his hand as if to enjoin silence.

"How unjust you are, Gulnare. No one knows it better than you, that I am but the tool of the state. Who has been with you? Your eyes stare as if they had seen a ghost."

"Perchance I have," she flashed.

"Then I must exorcise the evil spirit," he replied coaxingly, yet palpably ill at ease.

"The evil spirit is yourself. Where is Marco?"

Strozzi took a forward step, as if to take her hands.

"Do not touch me," she flashed. "Where is Marco?"

"A strange question from one who knows the answer."

"Do not think to deceive me with your hellish arts," she flashed upon him. "Where is Marco? I will know the truth! Perchance — oh my God! — I know it already."

"You know his sentence, Gulnare. He was consigned to the leads, there to expiate his crime."

"To expiate?" she shrieked.

"You remember our compact, Gulnare! The condition on which his life was spared! You know his accusers, his judges!"

"Why do you remind me?" she turned on him like a

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tigress. "Have I not tasted it every day, have I not dreamed the horrors of it every night of my life, and cursed myself, for the vile thing I am? Yet I bore up under the insufferable disgrace for his sake. And have I not cursed you, too, even to the deepest pool of hell? Where is Marco?"

Strozzi's face under the mask was ashen grey.

"Where, but in his cell?"

"There is no prisoner of that name under the leaden roofs." The man gave a start.

"How is this known to you?"

"Ah! Traitor and betrayer! One learns caution in your school! I have visited the *piombi*. Not a cell did I leave unentered on my rounds. What have you done with him?"

"You have dared?"

"I would dare anything for him," she flashed. "Anything to tear from your face the mask of lies and hypocrisy."

For a moment Strozzi stood utterly stunned. Here was food for thought, indeed! Defiance met him on every side. Could it be that those he had made pliable to his desires sensed some impending change, hidden to his own divination?

The task for which he had chosen Gulnare was well-nigh accomplished, as the hour of his own triumph drew near. What mattered a human life, a human soul, more or less, in the relentless path he had traced out for himself?

If Gulnare had indeed entered the prisons, she had an accomplice in that very abode of terror, whence none came forth again, save to his death.

With an effort he restrained himself, to learn the whole truth from her lips.

"I swear to you, I do not understand," he said at last.

"Have I not been plain enough?" she turned on him. "Marco is not in the prisons. Where then is he?" she concluded with a wail of anguish.

As he gazed at her, his rising passion well-nigh mastered him.

How well her defiance clothed her! She was like some wild thing, untamed and eager for the conflict.

"This is indeed matter for investigation," he tried to soothe her. "Can it be the warden anticipated my orders?"

"To kill him, monster?"

He raised a restraining hand.

"To release him."

She regarded him for a moment — dumb, incredulous.

"To release him?"

"The time of your probation is drawing to a close, Gulnare. Your faithfulness is about to be rewarded. But one task remains to be accomplished. Then you shall bid these walls farewell forevermore, unless, indeed, you choose to remain of your own free will!"

"Another murder?" she shrilled.

"A harsh term, Gulnare, one which the Three would not easily condone," Strozzi replied, breathing hard under the restraint he was imposing upon himself. "The paths of justice are dark and devious. It was to strike a wholesome terror into the hearts of these autocrats, who trample under their heels the lowly, that this means was resorted to. Their wealth and influence would ever save them from the doom they so richly deserve — libertines and traitors all! To prove to you how unjust are your suspicions, Gulnare, I am myself the target of suspicion of those above. They love not to owe a debt of gratitude. Yet they dare not refuse the boon I mean to ask of them."

"Where is Marco?" she turned upon him so suddenly that he almost lost his hard-acquired restraint.

"Doubtlessly he was taken from the cell of the condemned and transferred to some other prison to avoid the possibility of a mistake."

The woman shuddered.

"What cell then holds him now?"

"That is still for us to discover."

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His tone of sincerity seemed to soothe her somewhat.

"What then am I to do?" she queried abjectly.

"It shall be your last task. Its accomplishment releases two who pine for each other."

For a moment the girl closed her eyes, as if to shut out the vision, blinded by hope.

"Surely his crime, committed to protect the woman he loved, deserved of lesser punishment."

Strozzi shrugged.

"To kill the scion of a noble family, whom you had lured to your abode —"

"You lie!" Gulnare leaped at him, white to the lips. "I never was the foul thing I am to-day till I met one blacker than the fiend in hell."

Strozzi raised his hand as if to stem the torrent of her wrath.

"There is the testimony."

"Lying and foresworn —" she flashed.

"The judges deem not so! You had lured Maffeo Tebaldi to your house for some dark purpose of your own. When Marco arrived and found you in his arms the deed was done. Before the law you are his accomplice."

"It is a lie," she shrieked, "coined by the fiend himself on some burning pillow of anguish. I could shriek to heaven to witness for me," she continued, throwing up her arms despairingly. "But heaven is as cruel and deaf to the voice of truth as these cowed monsters. Who was his accuser? Let him stand face to face with me!"

Strozzi squirmed.

"His accuser was — the Lions' Mouths —"

She covered her face with her hands while the scalding tears streamed through her white fingers.

"And upon this infamous accusation they broke two lives!"

Her whole body shook and swayed under the tide of emotion that was surging over her.

An evil light gleamed in Strozzi's eyes. Never had she appeared so desirable as at this moment.

There was a silence. At last she turned to him.

"When am I to do this thing?"

"Be at the Fondamenta Sanudo three nights hence, at the hour of midnight. The chosen one will not fail to pay his respects."

"Who is he?" she queried, a strange light in her eyes.

"The fishes ask no names."

"By what sign then shall I know him?"

"By his saintly deportment."

"Not the stranger?" she queried with a start.

"Does he enjoy a special dispensation?"

"What crime is he accused of?"

"He has insulted the majesty of Venice?"

She made no reply, but seemed to collapse within herself.

Strozzi was watching her every gesture.

"Who is it to be, the stranger — or Marco?" he turned to her brutally, his voice hard as steel.

She almost fell at his feet.

"Have pity — this once," she sobbed.

"What is this stranger to you?" he queried slowly, a dark suspicion rising up within him.

"He is the one man who has not insulted me."

"Perchance you gave him no opportunity, fair Gulnare," he replied, his double-edged thrust stabbing her to the quick.

"Your scruples against the will of the Three are like water between two millstones."

"This then is to be — the last?"

"It is to be — the last!"

She struggled to her feet.

Strozzi tried to support her trembling frame.

"Do not touch me," she laughed shrilly, waving him back, while a shudder passed through her body. "I am arrayed to kill! Are you satisfied, my lord?"

CHAPTER X

THE BLACK CHAPEL



ZUAN leaped into the waiting gondola and directed the gondolier to steer his craft towards the distant channel of Giacomo dell' Orio. A writhing sound like the banshee's cry shivered from nowhere through the opaque gloom and died to silence.

Every fibre of his being was strung taut. The dark power that had struck at the very roots of his being was rallying its forces for its final onslaught that was relentlessly to shatter whatever lay in its path.

The bells of Venice were beating out the twelve strokes of midnight from a hundred shadowy steeples.

The night was sultry and close. There was no moon and most of the gondolas carried torches. Now and then the warning *Stalé* of a gondolier waked the echoes. Otherwise, deepest silence reigned on the dark and gloomy estuary.

Owing to the darkness, the gondolier maintained a slow, steady stroke. Here and there gondolas lay moored near dark, mysterious doors that opened onto the water. Some were empty. In others the rowers lay asleep. Now and then a black boat would steal up in the darkness and vanish in the murk.

They had arrived in the dark and deserted Rio which was their destination. Zuan ordered the gondolier to extinguish

his torch and to steer his boat under the eaves of the dark palaces that bordered the canal.

In silence they waited.

Now a splash of oars was heard, and, gliding through the darkness came a single boat. It stopped some fifty paces from Zuan's craft. A man leaped onto the landing and disappeared.

For a time all was quiet.

Now a pair-oared gondola sped past and, by the light of the torch it carried, Zuan noted its occupant, a woman, with two armed retainers seated beside her.

There was no mistaking the vision.

On what nocturnal errand was Yaga bent?

Zuan's teeth snapped.

"Row!" he turned to the gondolier, and the boatman instantly drove the gondola in pursuit.

"Follow, neither overtake, nor lose her!"

It needed no urging. Silently the gondola, like a huge snake, crept in the wake of its object; but almost superhuman effort was required not to lose it, for seemingly from nowhere nocturnal craft leaped out of the night, cutting across their path, blurring their vision, increasing the distance between them.

Zuan urged the gondolier to greater effort. Some belated gondolas passed them as they entered a channel navigable only for boats of very light draught.

"Row slowly," Zuan turned to the gondolier. "Do not let your oar make the slightest sound till we are well upon them."

Suddenly the object of their pursuit appeared round the bend of the canal, passed them at redoubled speed, then vanished in one of the narrow waterways.

The gondolier's stroke betokened an arm that was far from steady. To overtake Yaga's gondola seemed utterly hopeless.

For one familiar with the intricacies of Venetian waterways there was still the element of chance. Zuan decided to take it.

Dismissing the gondolier, he effected a landing at the inter-

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section of the two canals, one of which had swallowed up Yaga's gondola and decided to continue his quest on foot.

His way lay through winding lanes, over bridges so narrow that two men could not pass abreast, through passages where rogues lurked and repulsive faces were thrust grinning into his own. Dark, menacing rows of houses overshadowed the canals and not till he came out before the church of Santa Maria Formosa did he once halt and look behind him.

It was now long past the sixth hour of the night and the region showed dreary and deserted. Furtively he passed along the narrow foot-path with long, shadowy reaches between islands of light. From patch to patch he passed, and each votive lamp found him more stealthy, more furtive.

Not a shop or house showed any light. In the deep shadow of a wall he stopped. Not a living thing moved about him.

The lane he had entered was a cul-de-sac. From afar he could hear the muted pulse of sleeping Venice.

He was about to retrace his steps when the sound of an approaching footfall fell upon his ear. One masked and wrapped in a dark mantle approached, and was immediately swallowed up by the darkness.

Zuan waited for the man to return. A dead wall, at the end of the lane, would prove an insurmountable obstacle to his farther advance and its height precluded the possibility of a leap to the other side.

The spirit flames of gondolas that raced between distant canal banks changed to flickering wraiths of blue, as they delved into the inky blackness of Venetian midnight lanes. In the distance the shrouded city of Rialto rose dismal and ghostly against the sombre background of the night.

Determined to discover by what means the muffled shape had made his way from this lugubrious cut, Zuan found himself twisting back and forth in the narrow lane, and caught a glimpse of the Orfano Canal, more heavily burdened with secrets than Tiber or Tigris.

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Occasional flashes of light gleamed through the night. Sometimes a face showed close to a window, pallid, insane.

Before him frowned a high wall. On both sides, shadowy houses seemed to rise interminably into the nocturnal murk.

Suddenly Zuan recoiled with a start.

Almost directly before him, so near that he could have touched it with outstretched hand, a phantom form rose out of the darkness and vanished, swift as thought.

That moment sufficed to reveal to him the whole extent of his danger. He would have recognized Strozzi, masked and muffled though he was, among a thousand.

Whatever his purpose in this place and at this hour, it was nothing akin to the light of day.

Strung to a high tension Zuan waited in the darkness, a darkness as deep as the velvet midnight of the Orient.

The wall jutted out to the water's edge and the lagune licked the rough stone, smearing it with damp and slime, stuffing dank weeds and refuse into crevices and chinks, as if the very stones and mortar had mouths to fill.

Now steps were heard in the night; the approach of a furtive footfall. Ere he knew it, it was upon him.

From his concealment Zuan gleaned but an indistinct impression of a shrouded form that vanished into space before his very eyes.

Puzzled beyond anything he had experienced, Zuan crept out of the recess whence he had witnessed these seemingly miraculous events, determined to discover the method employed by Strozzi and his followers in rendering themselves invisible before his very eyes.

For a time his efforts to discover some secret device in the wall proved utterly futile.

A distant bell whimpered through the night, accentuating the silence.

Suddenly Zuan felt the ground under his feet give way and

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in one awful flash of revelation the disappearance of the twain was explained.

Coming, as it did, with unexpected suddenness he could not suppress a low outcry of dismay, as the foundation seemed to crumble from under him and he shot in a sharp incline through the gloom till his feet touched ground and he caught himself with a gasp. Above him the trap had closed without a sound.

Stygian darkness enveloped him, as he staggered to his feet, extending a groping hand on either side, to gain his bearings. Did this passage descend into the bowels of the earth, or did it lead to some definite goal?

The earth was soft and deadened his footsteps. But there was the danger of his colliding with some one who had either preceded him into this shaft of darkness, or who was coming from the opposite direction.

Zuan resolved to risk the encounter and, drawing his dagger, continued his groping advance. Determined, he set one foot before the other, straining his gaze through the interminable gloom.

What dread mystery shrouded these walls, deserted of the living?

Into what dark scheme was he about to gain a glimpse?

Upon what new victim had his giant antagonist set his death-seal?

He was conscious that some malignant power, harmful to human life, ruled these shadowy reaches. Sounds, eerie, indistinct, seemed, one by one, to detach themselves out of the tomb-like silence. Zuan continued slowly, steadily. He seemed to be passing through the fitful, fevered phases of a dream.

Suddenly he paused, as in the throes of a panic.

Stealthy footsteps resembling those of the puma seemed to scurry over the damp stone flags which had succeeded the soft earth. They seemed to advance, to recede, then die to silence.

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For a moment Zuan paused, weighing the chances of success.

Retreat was cut off, but, his intuition informed him, there must be another outlet from this labyrinth of darkness.

Suddenly the horror was upon him. He was but in time hugging the abutment of the wall.

A black, sable form, a wicked parchment face with wolfish fangs, the filmed jaundiced eyes that stared straight ahead, like the eyes of the dead, inanimate, inhuman, it passed him, blinded by the light of its own torch, like some evil spirit returned to earth, to renew its own doom. Zuan's gaze never wavered from the malignant, emotionless countenance. Each second, while he passed, seemed a lingering death.

Now a signal shivered through the night-wrapt corridors and was answered and re-answered in seemingly a thousand mocking echoes.

A faint radiance, piercing the basaltic blackness of the passage lured him onward. His heart gave a bound. The perils he had braved had not then been in vain! His hand gripped his poniard, as he stealthily advanced towards the radiance.

He stood at the entrance of a chapel, whose arches stretched interminably into the night that brooded beneath its roof. A scene, stranger than any scene he had ever dreamed of, held his gaze, his senses spell-bound. With the hazy manner of a sleeper suddenly awakened he looked about. The entire place seemed to lie under the spell of an invisible, immeasurably wicked intelligence.

Somewhere in the bowels of the earth a wail was heard, falling to new silences, a low, fitful sound like the sudden moan of a strange wind.

Zuan felt a slight tingling in his veins, as does a swimmer about to plunge into water of unguessable temperature. His first sensation was not of relief, but fear. But conscious that his course was set and that he must navigate it accordingly, he crept towards the shadowy arch that opened into the chapel.

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The roof was of solid masonry and rose in a wide, semi-circular arch to the height of about ten feet. The sides were divided by slight partition walls into ranges of low, narrow catacombs. The entrance to each cavity was surrounded by an obtusely pointed arch resting upon slender granite pillars.

Streaming in a wavering line upon the roof, the fitful flame of a torch fell partially upon those assembled in this strangest of places, throwing some into darkest relief and casting the opaque and fantastic shadows of others upon the stone floor.

A strange medley of what seemed to be Turks, Bosniacs, Greeks and Asiatics struck the gaze with sinister import. A number of Venetians in black dominos and masks heightened by sombre contrast the phantasmagorical effect of the picture, whose central glory was a woman seated upon a black marble coffin — Yaga, the Magyar.

The dimmed radiance of the torch seemed to throw out in strong relief the classic curves of her body, seemed to enhance the agate sheen of the white hands and arms, and to kindle an aureole round the amber-colored hair.

The same radiance fell slant-wise upon the face of the man who stood behind her, revealing a yellow skin, high, protruding cheek bones, bushy eyebrows, an aquiline nose, heavy, sensuous lips and yellow, discolored teeth.

A slanting mustachio, curving Tartar fashion downward over the large mouth, completed an ensemble that seemed to suit the abode, as the abode suited the man.

In the throes of an excitement that necessitated an extraordinary restraint upon himself, Zuan took in every detail of the fantastic picture and even ere a word was caught up by his listening ear, he guessed intuitively the import of the scene of which he was to be an unseen spectator. There remained but to fix upon the persons of the conspirators. He doubted little but that they would reveal their identity ere dawn washed the sky of its hidden stars.

But, as if drawn towards her by a power outside of himself,

Zuan's gaze reverted upon Yaga, who seemed more beautiful than ever.

Resting her tense white arms as a support upon the coffin, her face almost supernaturally pale, the dark pools of her eyes, eyes to love and eyes to fear, seemed darker by contrast. They were fixed upon the speaker, Lucio Strozzi, and the latter, conscious of her attention, spoke somewhat louder than his wont.

"Two-thirds of the Dalmatians have come over," he said, enumerating the forces on which the conspirators could count. "In Istria, in Epirus, in the Morea, the soldiery has openly declared against Gradenigo. The surrender of Cremona can no longer be concealed from the meanest beggar and Ferrara is resting on her arms, ready at any moment to join the enemies of the Republic. Those dusky knaves, your countrymen," he turned to a personage garbed in fantastic livery, "will see us starve rather than send us supplies under the present rule. The fleet at Corfu was secured long ago, but the news that the Doge cannot count upon a single galley in blue water only reached us to-day! The Genoese are ripe for mischief. You may trust them never to forget, nor to forgive, the disgrace of Chioggia. Fail! It is as impossible to fail as for the Campanile to turn into a galley. Already we outnumber the forces of Venice ten to one!"

"You have recited a formidable list," the man behind Yaga's chair interposed sardonically. "I cannot see that you are in further need from me and mine!"

Strozzi shot a sharp, questioning glance in the direction of the speaker.

"Half the number that have pledged their troth would suffice to procure the hornéd bonnet for my gondolier, were he the favorite of the hour, so far as Venice is concerned. Michelé Steno might be Doge to-morrow, notwithstanding a past slightly tainted with gallantry not sufficiently rebuked by the Forty. The people, though cowed at the present hour,

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the fear of death in their very souls, are fickle enough to clamor for old Gradenigo at the last hour! We must reckon with Padua, Ancona and Treviso; and who knows what Ferrara dreams in the night? Venice must be coerced, the barbers and cobblers and clowns must be restrained. If need be, we must cut a few garlic-breathing throats."

"There must be no half measures," a voice interposed from somewhere in the crypt.

"Well said!" Strozzi turned to the unseen speaker. "Then, all the preliminaries being settled, let each approach, take the oath and receive the word."

Zuan strained every nerve to hear from his point of vantage.

Yaga had arisen. She stood among them in her bewildering beauty, like some Druid priestess of old, holding up a strange symbol, not akin to any ceremony of the Christian Church.

Amid a silence so tense that one might have heard the falling of a leaf, thirteen approached, one by one, absolved the ceremony by kissing the strange symbol extended by Yaga's white arm, and received in return the watchword.

The Greeks and Bosnians did not take the oath. The fewest of them even understood the Italian language.

They formed a semi-circle round the tall, commanding form of their leader. Strozzi's words sounded clear and distinct, as the knell of fate.

"On the eve of the day of Corpus Christi, an hour before midnight we assemble at the Palazzo Strozzi! Let each man be true to his appointed task. The Ban will seize Arbé and the Dalmatian Isles. The Albanian *stradiotes*, the Epirotes and the slaves of the galleys, will storm the arsenal. The Bosnians will overpower the Dalmatian bodyguard. It may be necessary to remove the Doge himself, lest the reactionary feeling should break out anew and we should find ourselves left with nothing for our pains but the choice of a cup of poison, a silken rope or five inches of steel. Nor need a man hope for pardon, if Gradenigo continues to sway the destinies of Venice."

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An inarticulate murmur followed this declaration, then, one by one, the conspirators departed, as Zuan had correctly surmised, in a direction opposite the one by which he had entered.

At last Yaga and Strozzi were the only remaining denizens of the chapel and Zuan strained every nerve not to lose a word of what might be spoken between them.

They faced each other by the fitful light of the torch that was burning low and would soon be consumed and extinguished. Broad bands of smoke curled, ever denser, to the vaulted ceiling, stirred uneasily by a draught from without.

Strozzi, after having assured himself that the last of the conspirators had left the chapel, turned to the woman whose gaze rested upon him with an inscrutable expression, knelt and raising her hands to his lips, said in a passion-choked voice:

"Let Lucio Strozzi be the first to greet the future Dogressa of Venice."

An inscrutable smile curved Yaga's lips.

"Am I to understand, my lord Strozzi, that you are honoring me with a proposal to become your wife?"

"My wildest dreams will then have been realized, Princess."

"But you have one wife, my lord, which by some, versed in such matters, is accounted sufficient. What shall you do with two? Harems are not in favor in Venice, and I fear two sultanas, possessed of the beauty and spirit of the Countess Strozzi and myself, would find the walls of your palace too narrow for them to exist, side by side. And you love the Countess very dearly. No man would go the length you did, to enjoy her society, who did not worship at the shrine."

Strozzi had raised his hand as if to stem the flow of her words.

"Passion, a fleeting fancy, envy of him she preferred to me, caused the plan to mature to make her mine," he replied

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in husky tones, "yet she closed the door of her soul to my pleading and even under my very roof she never surrendered. She remained adamant, mourning the lover of her youth. What was that?"

Both started into a listening attitude. Strozzi had drawn his dagger and was glaring around with wide, watchful eyes, while Yaga's fingers rested upon his arm, as she stood beside him.

A sound not unlike the scurrying of rats across the stone floor had startled their ear.

"Had I met you then, Princess," Strozzi continued, after a pause, "all would have been different."

"I dare say, my lord, you have not starved at the feast," Yaga interposed sardonically. "But there still remains another obstacle to be reckoned with. Some might call it trifling. There is the Ban."

"A barbarian, who deserves so little that we deliver Arbé into his hands, that we should rather man our galleys and drive the heathen dog into his mountain fastnesses."

"Were it not for our compact, my lord Strozzi," Yaga replied with a smile. "The Ban's Tartars will make short work of Arbé. Arbé," she lingered on the word. "Oh, how I hate the very sound and her who daily reminds me of it! This lovers' paradise from which I was cast into outer darkness."

She clenched her hands until she drove the nails into the soft, yielding flesh.

"Your hour has come — the hour of your triumph, Princess. You will sit enthroned in Venice, as you have sworn you would."

"An unstable element at best, my lord. How chilly it is and the piping of the bats is not pleasant music to my ears. Again, my lord Strozzi, how will you satisfy the Ban? What will you say to him when he demands my release from your gilded bower? How will you soothe his ire, whose heart beats furiously for me behind his hairy breast?"

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Strozzi regarded the beautiful enigma before him for a moment in silence, as if duly to impress her with his message.

"I intend to keep my promise," he said slowly, "to send to him one as fair as the lady he pines for."

Yaga bounded to her feet. Her eyes flashed fire.

"You would do this for me?" she panted.

"Her doom is sealed," he replied, his gaze devouring the wonderful apparition with his eyes.

Yaga's eyes rested on the man before her, past master of guile and treachery, and for a moment she could almost have found it in her heart to admire one who vied with herself in utter unscrupulousness.

"Let that be my affair," she cried exultingly. "A gift fit for my lord, the Ban. Who knows but that she may find favor in his eyes? What of the man?"

"What is he to you?" Strozzi turned to her sharply.

She gave a smile.

"I long to hear the pronouncement of his doom."

"He shall trouble us no more! But the candle burns low, and the early dawn peeps all too revealingly into our enterprise. Time is short and death waits for no man."

Suddenly Yaga's hand clutched the arm of her companion.

Strozzi's gaze followed the direction of Yaga's eyes.

He stood as if turned to stone.

The words that had formed themselves on his lips died in the utterance.

A tall form wrapped in sable robes on the tunic of which were embroidered Three Leopards Rampant in vivid scarlet, came slowly out of the background, passed through the central arch of the chapel, and vanished in the corridor beyond.

Yaga's face was white as the face of the dead.

"The Leopard Prince!"

Strozzi seemed paralyzed in every nerve.

For a moment they faced each other in a white silence.

Then Strozzi's poniard hissed from its sheath.

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"Now or never! He dare not leave this place alive!"

Yaga laid a detaining hand upon his arm.

"He saw nothing. If he did, doubt not, he is not here alone."

Their eyes strained into space. Yaga continued.

"Let us depart, my lord Strozzi. For the first time I have known the meaning of fear."

Strozzi's eyes stared in the direction where the sable form had vanished.

He was trembling from head to foot.

"Whatever he saw or heard — he shall surely die! In his very lair the steel shall find him. In three days Venice shall know the Leopard crest no more!"

Then, as if seized by an unreasoning panic they fled into the darkness and the echo of their footsteps died away among the arches.

No sooner had their retreating forms vanished from sight than Zuan rushed from his concealment.

In the Stygian gloom that surrounded him, his progress was slow and laborious. Carefully he groped his way through the darkness filled with stagnant air and mephitic vapors, when he perceived, in the far distance, the faint glimmer of a light.

Outside a dim, ghostly dawn drew the curtains of light over the City of the Sea.

Of Strozzi and his companion he discovered not a trace.

CHAPTER XI

LA FARFARELLA



OR all that, things went on in Strozzi's palace much as usual. It was noticed however, among his retainers, that he was absent oftener than his wont, and a profound gloom had settled over the master of the house.

There were strange rumors afloat concerning mysterious meetings between Strozzi and an adept in the black arts. It was rumored among his people that in some dark and secluded chamber he found the secret of his power and the chief inspirations to cruelty. In the palace his visits to Fulvia's chamber were watched and counted with something like a shudder.

Even so his attendants little suspected how much more strange and how much more awful than their wildest imaginings were the words that a hidden listener, if any had been so careless of death and torture as to play the eavesdropper, would have heard.

One there was who trailed him like his shadow, Stiatta, his factotum.

A strange change had come over the castellan, which might have been traced to a source he dared not admit to himself.

Pale, silent, unapproachable, Fulvia moved about her chamber. Her manner was both haughty and repellent whenever Strozzi forced himself into her presence. Since that

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terrible night when upon waking from a drugged sleep she had suddenly gazed into Zuan's eyes, seen the gleaming knife suspended above her ready to descend, seen her unwitting executioner fall to his death, her lips had spoken not once. Though the import of the terrible nightmare which she had lived had escaped her, an inner voice informed her that Strozzi's ever fertile brain had conceived the hellish plot. She had learned that Zuan's body had not been found by those sent to drain the pool, and her silence was the more galling to Strozzi, since upon no single word or gesture he could fasten as a pretext for punishment.

The only person to whom she slightly unbent was Stiatta. Mistaking the condescension of his mistress for a sentiment as little akin to it as day is to night, the castellan began to treat Fulvia with an almost exaggerated deference. He followed her like her shadow. At the sound of Strozzi's approaching footsteps he was off again, silent and furtive, as he had come.

His infinite precautions and the risk attending his visits gave them a fictitious value, of which Messer Stiatta was well aware.

Fulvia feared the castellan. Nevertheless she tolerated him near her, and, seizing upon any pretext, Stiatta never lost her out of his sight.

Thus it was that, creeping about according to his wont, he came upon Fulvia, seated in her chamber. Latterly he began to entertain misgivings. It seemed to his dull brain that he was too long in putting off the hour of his onslaught. Fulvia seemed each day farther removed. No longer could he be sure of finding her disconsolate or open to suggestion. Her spirits had strangely revived and she no longer appeared the easy prey of his anticipation. Stiatta could not afford to wait a relapse into despondency. Seizing upon the moment, he decided to make the most of it.

Feigning to ignore her agitation, Stiatta made capital of

the ever increasing cruelty and suspicion of his master. Fulvia listened, indifferently at first, then with something of added interest, as the castellan circled nearer and nearer the climax of his discourse.

Vaguely at first, then with subtle touches he hinted the misery of her lot. Such a tyrant as Strozzi had never been seen on land or sea. No more unfortunate woman walked the earth than she who endured such bitter humiliations at the hands of this monster. It was evident that Strozzi's political star had run its course. Here he was in his extremity, disowned and discredited by his former friends. Yet was he not the man to accept defeat without making his temper felt and, since those who had provoked it were beyond his reach, nothing was surer than that he would wreak his vengeance on those within his power. Let Donna Fulvia beware. A former mistress he cast off as a worn-out shoe, under circumstances which Stiatta dimly shadowed forth. True, she was but a courtesan. How then would a lady fare? The remedy lay in Donna Fulvia's hands. An hour hence it might be too late.

"Who is this creature?" Fulvia turned to the speaker.

"One stowed away in San Sepolcro, a place haunted by evil spirits," Stiatta replied.

"I, too, have heard the name," she replied, thoughtfully.

A slight sound behind the arras caused both to give a start. Stiatta tiptoed to the wall putting a large misshapen hand to his ear.

"A rat, madonna . . . I was saying . . ." his voice sank to a confidential whisper. Fulvia listened, her hands pressed against her heart, an expression of deadly nausea in her face.

"I overheard him giving the order, Donna Fulvia," Stiatta continued. "Concealed behind the panel he waited and watched."

A silence as of death reigned in the chamber.

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Fulvia's face was as white as if her spirit were already floating over the poppy-fields of oblivion.

"Stiatta," she said at last, in a panic of fear, "I have always treated you kindly even though you were my appointed — though perchance unwilling — gaoler."

Rising with difficulty, for her limbs would hardly support her, she took three gold pieces from a secret drawer and laid them side by side in Stiatta's hands.

"A small token for your services," she said, trying to steady her voice.

Kneeling, Stiatta touched the woman's sandals with his lips. She shuddered and could hardly refrain from crying out as she met the gaze of his upturned eyes.

What she read therein caused her hand to steal to her bosom, to make sure of the small jewelled dagger without which she never stirred.

The rat behind the arras vanished as Stiatta quitted the chamber, leaving Fulvia in a panic of fear and dismay.

Hardly had the castellan withdrawn when Strozzi summoned a gondola and gave the direction of San Gregorio.

He had overheard every word from the curtained recess. Neither his manner nor his speech when he arrived in the hall below indicated that his temper had been ruffled.

But the gleam of his eyes, with which he followed the retreating form of the castellan, might have caused Stiatta some slight trepidation.

This hound was not only infatuated with the woman he was to guard, but he was clearly plotting against himself. Such black ingratitude deserved some recognition. Vengeance was a sweet morsel to be rolled lingeringly under the tongue, not gulped down as a famished hound snatches a chicken bone.

The supple craft danced over the waters of the Grand Canal and entered a dark winding *calle*, through which it pursued its course until it had almost reached the end of the lane, when Strozzi gave orders to land.

Alighting, he strode up to the door of a sombre, squalid-looking house and hammered on the oaken panel with his steel gauntleted fist, evoking a hollow thunder that echoed down the narrow water lane and called the neighbors to the windows, but, for some time, elicited no response from within. Finally, however, a grated panel slid aside, disclosing an angry eye.

"Open!" Strozzi commanded peremptorily.

The eye disappeared. There followed a fumbling at the fastenings, the clanking fall of a heavy bar and the door swung inward, leaving a small space. In it appeared the form of an old hag, grey, bony, watery-eyed, licking her blue, toothless gums.

"Haste!" cried the old witch. "Messer, for the love of the Virgin, make haste!"

Strozzi entered and the door closed behind him, leaving an empty step to the curiosity of the onlookers.

La Farfarella having barred the door squatted hurriedly to a far corner, whence immediately came the sound of blows and horrid shrieks and squeals. Strozzi, left standing just within the threshold, grimaced at the din, but for some time could distinguish nothing, so dark was the room. The shrieks were deafening. A close, fetid smell assailed his nostrils. For a moment the hair bristled on his head and a shudder shook his frame.

"What in Hell's name?" he muttered. Then, as the darkness cleared like the rolling away of a black curtain, he perceived La Farfarella crouched on a low settee, belaboring with might and main some shadowy object at her feet. Strozzi advanced and saw, strapped to a little bench, a pig, twisting and screaming as each merciless blow descended. Lathe-like foam oozed from its jaws and dripped into a bowl set on the floor.

"By all the fiends of Hell, what is the meaning of this?" he shouted into La Farfarella's ear.

The woman wagged her head angrily and continued her blows.

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At last, with a last spasmodic convulsion and ear-piercing shriek, the wretched animal relaxed and its head fell limply from the end of the bench. La Farfarella dropped her scourge, seized the little bowl and inspected its contents with a frown.

"Little enough!" she complained. "Pigs are not what they used to be in my young days."

"What is this Hell's brew?" queried Strozzi, pointing to the receptacle.

La Farfarella hobbled across to a swinging shelf, covered the bowl carefully and turned with a courtesy.

"A poison, swift and sure, a very lightning flash — or slow and sure, as occasion demands. Not three persons on earth beside myself know the secret, Messere. Not many have looked upon such a sight, as you have, my lord. And you had not seen it, but that you half battered down my door and raised the neighborhood. An ill trick, my lord, if it displeases you not."

"But the pig?" asked Strozzi, as she paused. "What of the pig? Its squeals still rings in my ears."

She looked at him keenly then, with an air of great gravity, and resumed:

"Listen, my lord, you shall hear what I would tell to no other throughout the length and breadth of Italy. This secret, mind you, is worth more than your weight in ducats. You feed the pig on arsenic: a little to-day; more to-morrow; much the third day. When he is like to die you beat him; even as you have seen me do; and the slaver is the most exquisite, the most subtle poison in the world. Arsenic! Any fool can use arsenic!" She advanced and shook her grimy fist in Strozzi's face. "Ah! You may well fall back! Even to breathe it is dangerous. Mark you, my lord! Arsenic leaves a trace, it embalms the body, but arsenic distilled through the body of a pig defies detection. And this, too! A drop of it suffices, where a spoonful of rude arsenic would fail. I have known a man to die, having eaten of a fork barely dipped in this exquisite essence. It has neither taste, nor odor. Rub it on

the rim of a glass, and he who drinks from it is as surely doomed, as if your lordship had cleft his heart in twain."

"It leaves no trace, you say?" Strozzi asked.

"As much trace as a lady's kiss," the hag chuckled.

Strozzi bethought himself.

"I would see, if my amethyst change color —"

"No stone and no test will disclose its presence. But satisfy yourself."

She led the way to the shelf and uncovered the bowl.

Strozzi pulled off his gauntlet and held out his hand. The amethyst shone with its accustomed purplish radiance. Stripping it impatiently from his finger, he poised it on his outstretched palm.

"This for you, *comare*, so you do me the service I require of you."

La Farfarella cast an appraising eye at the jewel.

"That depends upon the service, my lord. I have long discerned your high destiny and promised myself the benefit of your patronage."

"My high destiny seems in a fair way to bury itself in a well," Strozzi replied sardonically.

"A well may reflect a star," La Farfarella replied with ready wit.

"Nevertheless I require your assistance, *comare*," Strozzi interposed.

The hag was all attention. }

"Let us suppose," Strozzi began blandly, "that one of my household is afflicted with a grievous malady — not one that requires the surgeon's knife, but something insidious, invisible to the naked eye."

"Then," replied La Farfarella, "look to a *ruffiana* of reputation and you will find the most famous physician in the world. My lord, I have knowledge of nocturnal herbs and the like; I can compound ointments of rat's livers and snake eyes and spider's tongues with any apothecary in Italy."

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Strozzi shook his head.

"The person of whom I speak is ill of a disease that requires a swift remedy. I am not for half cures. No drugging with herbs; no application of dried spiders will suffice. I require something that will strike at the root of the malady."

La Farfarella nodded. She understood. It was not the first time such assistance was asked of her.

"Does your lordship require a direct remedy, swift and sure, or one equally direct, but of a safe discretion? Something which, once administered, will eradicate the evil before he who takes it has had time to set down the glass, or one that will lie dormant for a month or six months and then by slow process effect the cure?"

"Neither the one nor the other, though of the twain the first were more to my liking."

"What then?"

"Something that in the space of an hour will have done its work. And mark you, *comare*, something that leaves no trace behind."

La Farfarella gave a nod.

"A strong remedy and a sure one! I'll warrant it to cure all the evils of life and send a soul to Hell as neatly as your lordship could desire."

She chuckled and sucked in her withered lips.

"So let it be! Your intelligence does you credit."

"My intelligence," cackled the hag. "What else is left me? In my youth, soft skin and a pair of bright eyes brought me bread and to spare; now I live by my wits. Then I served, for a consideration. Now others serve me."

"For a consideration?"

"What else? Also the honor. My lord, you will laugh as you see the evil shrivel up before your very eyes. La Farfarella makes no empty boast."

So saying she approached the shelf and selected a tiny phial, just large enough, it seemed, to contain a single tear.

She held it up.

"See, my lord, I burden you with no cumbersome flagons."

He gave a nod, watching her eagerly, while she manipulated the poison into its tiny receptacle.

Then she placed it in his hands, and Strozzi, in return, gave her the amethyst.

An avaricious gleam brightened her eyes. With deferential haste she unbarred the door, bowing obsequiously.

Strozzi, now in haste to be gone, strode out in the open, inhaling the fresh air with relief. The closeness, the odor of drugs, accumulated dirt, and the poisoned pig had sickened him to nausea. Entering his gondola he gave the direction and the sombre craft sped away in the direction of the Rio del Carminé.

CHAPTER XII

FORBIDDEN MEADOWS



DURING the days that followed his discovery of the conspiracy, the earth seemed to have swallowed Zuan Castello. He had vanished utterly from the canals and the piazzas and the diligent quest of Strozzi's nocturnal spies failed so utterly in tracing him, that Strozzi himself began to incline to the belief that he had perished in the water cavern, notwithstanding the testimony to the contrary of those entrusted with the task of finding his body.

One evening, Zuan received a mysterious summons to be at the Fondamenta Sanudo, at the fourth hour of the night. He was at once accosted by a mask who scrutinized him from every angle ere he absolved the business upon which he had come.

"Come — but come alone," stated the message which was placed in Zuan's hands. "If you intend treachery or disregard my injunction, you will never find me."

Gulnare had signed her name.

The risk of the venture, though long contemplated, presented itself anew. That Gulnare was an instrument of one who was undermining the Venetian state, he had guessed long ago. The chief of the conspirators, whoever he was, could boast of at least a score of successful assassinations, not including the hitherto unsuccessful attempts upon his own life. She

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was the accomplice of this nameless horror that stalked through Venice, paralyzing the souls of the people, defying the authority of the Doge.

The sky was cloudy, the moon obscured.

Without pausing to weigh the risk of the venture, Zuan started on his way. Hailing a gondola, he found himself, after a time, in the deserted region of San Sepolcro.

Dismissing the gondolier Zuan followed the winding path along the narrow, stagnant canal. Nothing stirred. Only the dull lapping of the water struck the ear. At the appointed time he stood before the gates of the deserted cloister when he felt a timid touch upon his shoulder. With a start he turned. Before him stood Gulnare.

Placing a warning finger on her lips she enjoined silence, then bade him follow. Again he traversed the labyrinthine maze of corridors. Unmolested they gained the end. They came to a short flight of stairs, which they descended, then entered a second corridor, crossing the first at right angles.

They passed through a low, narrow door and Zuan's heart beat strangely, as he followed his masked guide through the dusky aperture. The gloom seemed to swallow them up and he began to wonder what the moments to come held in store for him.

His eyes were fixed upon the graceful form of the girl as she flitted before him, silently as a phantom. How lovely she was! A sudden thought came to him. Was she leading him to his death?

He shuddered, and Gulnare, as if she had guessed his thoughts, turned.

"Have I done something to displease you?" she spoke, after having locked the door that gave admittance to the chamber he had visited on a former occasion.

"No!" Zuan replied, trying to appear unconcerned. "I was but considering—"

"How evil I am?"

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"How maddening it is to remember that you are the accomplice of a criminal."

"Oh!" she said with a start and he noted the slight tremor of her hand as she trimmed the wick of the candle. He could not but note the fine turn of the wrist, the soft texture of the skin and again the strange misgiving assailed him.

She bade him be seated and he complied, but not until he had taken in every detail of the room, including the floor and the walls. Then he took his seat in such a manner as to make it, to his mind, impossible for any one to come upon him unawares.

His manner gradually changed from the interested to the inquisitorial mood.

"Tell me, Gulnare. Why have you summoned me hither in the face of your previous warning, not under any pretext to approach these haunted precincts? Who is it that desires my death? Who are you? Surely you have not always led this life—"

He checked himself ere he gave utterance to the word that hovered upon his lips.

Gulnare had turned very pale.

"It matters not. But your guess is true. I was not always the thing I am." Her eyes flashed. "Let it be! What is it you wish to know?"

Zuan's eyes met those of the girl squarely.

"Whom do you serve?"

His question was stern in its directness.

"I serve a master," she replied after a pause, "whose name is Silence. Ask what questions you please, but ask not his name, if you would leave this place alive."

For a moment their eyes met and what he read in the dark orbs that held his own gave him pause.

"I knew not there lived in Venice one who exacts such secrecy,—a secrecy such as enshrouds but the Grandé."

She glanced at him, half pitifully, half defiantly.

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"I have no choice in the matter," she replied. "All I know is, he is the most dangerous enemy one can have."

"His name?" Zuan persisted.

"Ah! Do not ask it," she pleaded. "I will tell you all I can, all I dare. What I do not tell you, I cannot tell you, and this is one of the things, I dare not tell."

"What are you to him?"

She shrugged pitifully.

"Call it by whatever name you will."

"A woman of your temperament does not so easily submit to so abject a state," Zuan replied mercilessly, hoping to lash the truth out of her by assailing her pride. "What crime had you committed to absolve such penance?"

"As God lives, my soul is not stained with any crime."

"What do you call this business upon which you are engaged?"

"If you but knew! I, too, was happy, once upon a time. How short the dream! How terrible the awakening!"

Zuan regarded her for a moment in silence.

"Will you not tell me? Surely anything that could exonerate your trade should be given freely, that a shuddering world may know and pardon —"

"Who says I desire pardon?" she flashed in an access of passion.

"Who says you will not need it?" Zuan replied sternly.

"I read the question in your eyes. Why do I lure men into the clutches of him I serve? For this is what I do, even though I speak no word. Yet, I permit them to follow."

He shrank from her unconsciously.

"Then you admit that you do lure men to their undoing?"

"Oh! Do not press me farther," she moaned, looking about fearfully. "Have pity! Have pity!"

"What pity have you shown to those you lured hither to your den?" he persisted sternly.

"I showed mercy to you."

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"Because I was not then a marked man."

"Not so!" she flashed. "You were marked from the moment you set foot on Venetian soil."

Zuan almost started from his seat.

"Was this too known to you?"

She shrugged.

"Your life is not worth a sequin!"

"Are you going to save me to-night?" he asked with hidden meaning.

A great horror came into her eyes.

"If you knew what I risk in telling you so much, you would be more merciful," she replied. "Whatever I may have done — God only knows why — from first to last no man has touched me — none — save —"

She covered her face with her hands.

He regarded her almost fiercely.

"What is this bond between you and that one?"

"Oh, do not ask me."

"I will know —"

"You will drive me mad," she said in a low voice, her beautiful hands tightly interlaced. "I dare not tell."

"Dare not?" Zuan queried inexorably. "By what token then does he compel your silence?"

She shrank from him.

"You will not speak? Very well! I shall discover for myself."

He arose and started to cross the chamber in the direction of the door, through which he had made his escape on a former night.

She leaped at him like a tigress.

"Not this way! If you value your life, not this way!"

He paused. His lips curved in a sardonic smile.

"Ah! It is as I thought."

She stood before him, lithe, beautiful, white as death.

"What do you mean?"

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"That, your own lips shall tell me, fair Gulnare, together with the name of him you serve."

She did not raise her eyes.

"I dare not! I dare not!"

"When comes he?"

Her bosom heaved.

"He comes this very night."

"How opportune! It is to introduce us, that you have spread your nets to-night."

"No! No! No! He dares not find you here."

"Why not?" He spoke with a supercilious raising of the eyebrows.

"Because — oh! Will you not understand!" she sobbed.

"Because I would not have you harmed."

"And yet, for this very purpose did you lure me to your haunts. You who have not been touched by any man — save —"

"I spoke truth," she flashed, bending forward as if to leap at him.

"Perchance you have sinned rather in the omission than the commission," he replied in a sardonic tone. "Now — for what purpose did you desire my company to-night? Why did your messenger cross my path at the very moment when I was engaged in an adventure perhaps as interesting as the object for which I came?"

A strange sound at this moment broke on Zuan's ear.

It seemed to come from the bowels of the earth, from the floor directly beneath, and so ominous was the manifestation that he paled despite himself.

She, too, started, as a muffled sound re-echoed somewhere in an adjoining corridor, then a faint smile appeared on her lips.

"Who is there?" Zuan turned to her.

"No one!" she said. "These are dead men speaking from their tombs."

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There was a brief pause.

"What of him?" Zuan pursued his merciless questioning. "I am here to speak of him — your lord and master — of him, you obey — of him, at whose behest you have lured to your haunts the scions of the noblest families of Venice. By what token dares he compel your obedience?"

Chance directed his gaze towards the secret door.

"By a sign I must obey! Oh, do not torture me!"

"You are young, Gulnare!" Zuan interposed. "You are beautiful! You are not made of the stuff of murderesses and harlots. Why do you not sunder the chains that prove so irksome to you? Surely there are other places beside Venice, and you, so much alone, must surely have pondered ere now the chances of escape, ere the hand of the Three closes upon you."

She uttered a shrill laugh.

"If you refer to those above — craven hounds — who but use those they can crush for their own miserable ends—"

"You are uttering dangerous words, Gulnare!"

"Dangerous? Take me to them and I shall hurl them into their very teeth — into the face of their minion, the Leopard Prince — who can neither protect Venice nor himself."

"So it would seem," Zuan interposed. "Else how were it possible for such iniquity to flourish as inhabits this abode?" She cowered beneath the blow.

"You speak of that which you do not know," she flashed.

"All this does not answer my question," he persisted. "Why have you summoned me? Surely not merely to tell me that you cannot divulge the secret of your connection with one whose headless trunk will sooner or later grace the space between the granite pillars?"

She shook her head.

"The man lives not, who could accomplish this! Where is your Chief? Where is the Grandé? Where is your Leopard Prince, as he styles himself? Is he asleep — or dead? Every

man, every woman, every child in Venice, carry in their souls a terror too great for words; a terror of things that are happening nightly, and the terror within my own soul is such that I can only turn to the Holy Virgin and pray — if she will listen to the prayers of one like me? ”

“Come with me!” Zuan turned to the girl, to test her sincerity. “I shall find an asylum for you, where not even he whom you serve dares touch a hair upon your head.”

“Touch a hair upon my head?” she cried with sudden scorn. “Would I be his lure, his decoy, for one little half hour, if my life were my own?”

Zuan was torn by conflicting emotions.

He was resolved to learn the name of him who wielded a power so terrible, to confirm his knowledge of facts, somehow acquired.

He was temporizing, vaguely suspecting Gulnare of doing the same, for some recondite reason.

“Listen, Gulnare!” he turned to her. “If I assure you that your life is your own, if I reveal to you a secret that will place this miscreant in the hands of the Three whom he has so long defied — ”

She was watching him with eyes in which a new, a wild expression was dawning.

“If I tell you that life, not death, awaits you, will you come with me to-night?”

He drew swiftly towards her. She shrank from him, with a gesture of dismay.

“All this means nothing. You will be dead before we leave this abode. And I shall pay — oh, how I shall pay!”

“He shall never find you!” Zuan insisted. “No one shall find you! I shall kill him!”

She shrank yet farther from him.

“You know not what you say! You do not know him. If you knew, you would rue the hour you set foot in this chamber.”

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"To which you summoned me! Why then did you, Gulnare? Was it to tell me this?"

"No — no — no —"

"Then — what was it?"

She glanced up at him fearfully.

He repeated the question.

Abruptly she rose from her seat and closed her ears with her fingers.

"I cannot bear it! I cannot bear it!" she cried, "Go! For the love of the saints, go while you may!"

He regarded her quizzically.

"What is it you cannot bear, Gulnare?"

She raised pleading hands.

"Go!" she begged piteously. "If you care ever so little for the peace of my soul, go!"

"I am not so easily frightened," he replied without stirring.

"I shall not stir, until you have revealed to me why you have summoned me to the very place of which you warned me on a certain night."

"And what would the knowledge benefit you?" she turned upon him fiercely.

"Simply this! I shall know my enemy!"

Suddenly Gulnare's face turned white as the face of the dead and she staggered as if about to fall while her gaze was fixed upon the wall behind Zuan.

Noiselessly a panel had receded and out of the well of darkness a sinister form had entered the chamber, garbed in black from head to toe, the face concealed beneath a black satin vizor, above which towered a Montero cap of the same sombre hue.

The next moment, the unsheathed stiletto raised ready to descend in the fatal stroke, he stood directly behind Zuan. The voice seemed to have died in Gulnare's throat.

Following the direction of Gulnare's gaze, Zuan slowly turned and at the sight which met his eyes the blood froze in

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his veins and his energies seemed paralyzed. He could not have moved, had his life depended upon it and, as it was, it would but have hastened the end.

Above him, ready to strike and apparently waiting for Gulnare to leave the chamber, according to her custom, towered the cowed, sinewy form of the bravo, his eyes gleaming fearfully through the slits of his mask.

Gulnare's frantic gestures being unheeded by the bravo, she suddenly leaped past Zuan, as if to catch the blow of the suspended poniard.

"Stop, devil!" she shrieked deliriously and at the sound of her voice the bravo's arm fell limply to his side, as if paralyzed, and the long, keen blade dropped heavily on the floor.

Another moment and, frenzied to madness, Gulnare, with lightning rapidity, had torn the mask from the bravo's face.

At the sight of Sordello's features a piercing shriek broke from her lips, and with the cry "Marco!" she fell senseless to the floor.

Zuan's first move had been to assure himself of the bravo's weapon, a formidable blade some twelve inches long, narrow and straight, of finest tempered Damascene steel. Then he turned his attention to the prostrate form of Gulnare, unmindful of the bravo, who was kneeling by her side, and, having removed the satin vizor that covered her face, was trembling as one in an ague.

But, when Zuan's hand went out to raise the arm of the girl who lay as one dead, there came to him an arresting voice, which even the weapon he held in his hand ready to use at a moment's notice, caused him to respect.

It came from the bravo, whose eyes gleamed like live coals in the livid, sallow face and, as Zuan scrutinized the features, he was struck by a certain nobility, which seemed utterly out of keeping with his nefarious occupation.

"For one who before sunrise will hang head downward between the pillars, you are overbold, assassin," Zuan turned

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to the kneeling form. "Who is this woman, and what is she to you?"

The bravo glared at the questioner with blood-shot eyes and his limbs seemed tense like those of a tiger about to spring.

"Ask her who she is and what she was to me," came the fierce reply. "Ask her, when she returns to life — you — who have helped to bring her to this pass."

A sob choked Sordello's utterance.

Zuan stared from the prostrate form of the girl to the bravo who held her hands between his own, as if to infuse some warmth into the cold, lifeless flesh.

"Are you mad, fellow?" Zuan replied sternly. "Were you not summoned by this woman to slay me? Else, why are you here?"

He checked his speech, for there was something in Sordello's eyes that gave him pause.

"What of it?" the bravo replied surlily.

"Answer my question, fellow! Were you, or were you not, summoned by this woman, to slay me?"

"Who are you to question me — you — who are already dead before you leave this hovel? For — by San Marco — you shall die for this, like a dog!"

Zuan raised the poniard.

"Surely you are crazed with drink or some fatal drug. Approach, fellow!"

So commanding was Zuan's gesture that the bravo, though reluctantly, obeyed.

"One move and you are a dead man!" Zuan spoke, raising Sordello's weapon on high. "Now kneel and incline your ear."

The bravo staggered as if he had been dealt a death blow. Uttering a groan he fell prone upon his face.

"And now for the truth — the whole truth! Nay! Leave her alone!" Zuan commanded sternly, noting Gulnare's

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bosom heaving in regular breathing. "She will recover in time, unless it be that the sight of a monster like you has caused her heartbeats to stop forever."

"I will tell you everything, only do not let her die," the bravo begged piteously.

"Have you a tender spot somewhere beneath that assassin's robe of yours?" Zuan interposed sternly.

"I ask for no mercy for myself, my lord — only for her!"

"For the present, fellow, I am concerned with you alone. Her turn will come later. What have you to say? Be brief and remember your life is forfeit."

"I shall conceal nothing," Sordello replied abjectly. "Indeed this is the end! But, my lord, she is resting uneasily."

Zuan gave a nod of understanding.

Together they placed the lithe body on the ottoman.

Gulnare seemed like a sleeping child.

Beckoning to the bravo to precede him, Zuan and Sordello entered an adjoining room, where they remained closeted for near an hour. Had there been a listener present he might have heard a confession as heart-rending as it was terrible.

Zuan's face was stern and set when Sordello at last arose, the account of his life and crimes finished.

When they returned to the chamber, where they had placed Gulnare on the ottoman, both gave a start and faced each other in dismay.

The chamber was empty. Gulnare had disappeared.

END OF BOOK THE THIRD



BOOK THE FOURTH



CHAPTER I

THE STAR CHAMBER



FROM the Clock Tower on the Piazza of San Marco pealed the fourth hour of the night.

Deep silence reigned within the shadowy precincts of the arsenal, which rose beyond the battlemented walls of the dock yard, guarded by its erect and crouching lions on their graven pedestals, which have witnessed

many a momentous chapter of Venetian history.

Now and then a sable gondola, long and black and sinuous, with glinting flicker of tiny lamps and gaunt shadows of men erect on poop, landed at the water-stairs and departed quickly after discharging its inmate.

Within the extensive complex of the arsenal prevailed the silence of the tomb. Even the steps of the sentinels on guard in the night-wrapt corridors struck the ear with hushed and sinister import.

In a vaulted chamber, whose black walls and ceiling seemed to accentuate the gloom, before a table upon which stood an ivory crucifix and which constituted the only article of furniture, sat the Leopard Prince, engaged in the examination of some records, which the secretary of the Secret Tribunal had placed before him.

After a time the lone occupant of the chamber struck a gong.

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Out of the opaque gloom a form materialized.

"Bring him who waits before us."

The shadow melted into the shadows.

In obedience to a signal an African of huge bulk, low-browed and stealthy, hitherto screened by the gloom of the chamber, drew the bolt of a door, through which the sack containing the condemned was carried out into a boat, rowed away and drowned, where it was death to cast a net.

Through this fateful aperture one entered and paused.

The door closed soundlessly behind him.

By an ingenious contrivance the hood that shaded the lamp suspended from the black, fluted ceiling, shifted its position in such a manner as to throw the person of the Grand Inquisitor into deepest shadow, well suited to his gloomy and sinister office, while the light of the lamp was thrown on the spot reserved for those to be interrogated by the terrible presence. Not a motion, not a quiver of the eyelid, thus escaped the inquisitorial scrutiny, as, silent and saturnine, the unseen presence listened and adjudged.

He who had come in obedience to the summons shifted uneasily beneath the white glare of the lamp, which made him the only visible object in the chamber, the rest of the room being enveloped in sepulchral darkness.

The voice of the Leopard Prince came questioning out of the gloom.

"The nightly terror still haunts the lagunes."

The Chief of the Signori di Notte demurred.

"My lord, nothing that human foresight could devise or plan, has been left undone. The *sandolo* of the water police lay in waiting at the mouth of the Grand Canal. The night was dark. It rained in spells. We waited and watched. At the stroke of midnight the accursed thing was upon us. No one saw its coming. Suddenly it was there."

"And met a crew paralyzed with fear."

"Those who rowed the *sandolo*, my lord, were old and

tried. Against that terror they were not proof! Nevertheless we gave chase. The phantom galley slipped into the Giudecca Canal. Its speed exceeded our own, despite our twelve oars. And, as if purposely to enhance the panic among my men, it glided over the waters, silently, as the flight of a spirit, without the splash of an oar."

There was a moment's silence, then a question shivered out of the gloom.

"What course did the phantom galley hold?"

"My lord, first it bore to southward with the wind. Then doubling on its course it veered about and made for the open lagune. We swept the boat's head round, thereby throwing our quarry directly astern of us. Our men threw their whole weight into their stroke and the *sandolo* skimmed over the waters like a bird on the wing. But, fast as we rowed, they mocked our efforts to scorn. Even so, had the race continued in a broad stretch of water, we would, sooner or later, have overtaken them. Twice we crept up to them. Twice some accursed Istrian wood-barge cut across our prow. Again and again we turned and twisted about in the narrow canals, our sole purpose being to gain on the spectral craft, which seemed somewhat to abate its speed. It was but to lure us on, for suddenly, with one swift turn, it dashed off at redoubled speed, leaving the *sandolo* some forty yards behind, and vanished into space."

"Their course lay to eastward?"

"Towards the Dead Lagune."

"This confirms the reports of some Ragusan fishermen," the voice of the Leopard Prince cut the silence. "Their goal was the haunted tower adjoining the deserted convent. They pay us a poor compliment, these friends of ours," he concluded with a sardonical inflection. "No one cheats Venice twice."

There was a brief silence.

The Chief of the Signori di Notte gave a start.

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The Leopard Prince stood before him.

His stride, as he came out of the envining gloom, seemed, in its soundless elasticity, to resemble the gait of the puma, about to bound upon its prey.

Unrolling a parchment which he had taken from some hidden recess, he turned to the Chief of the sbirri.

"On this list," he pointed to its contents, "there appear thirteen names."

The Chief of the Signori di Notte nodded grimly.

"A most ill-advised tampering with fate —"

"I intend to shorten their number by one, yet leave the fatal Thirteen intact," the Leopard Prince remarked darkly.

Pedro Rovara regarded the speaker with a puzzled air.

"How may that be, my lord?"

"Let the 'how' be my affair, Messer Rovara," came the sardonic reply. "As for your share therein — you will station a six-oared gondola at the intersection of the Dario and San Rio Canals. Seven nights hence, at the stroke of the third hour, a gondola, carrying no lights, will come out of the Dario Canal. A *sirocco* is brewing and there will be no moon. Let your men hold a sharp lookout. As the gondola rounds the curve, ram and sink her. There is to be no rescue."

The Chief of the Signori di Notte repeated the order to his chief's satisfaction.

After a brief pause the Leopard Prince continued.

"The Dalmatians and the Epirote *stradiotes* will be guarding every avenue to the arsenal. The Grand Admiral Pisani has entered the harbor of Chioggia with our high-seas fleet. Pietro Gradenigo has sailed for Arbé with five galleys to intercept the Bosnians. Hold your sbirri in readiness. My further commands will be made known to you on the morrow. Have you secured the person of the Armenian?"

"The Armenian, my lord, cannot be found. During the night his booth has disappeared from the Piazza. The quest of my men was all in vain."

A grim nod from the masked and cowed figure came in response.

"This Armenian," the Leopard Prince resumed after a pause, "is less and more than he seems. An impostor, proved and convicted, he is the secret intermediary between our enemies, within and without. The phantom galley is his vehicle, to cow the superstitious, to prepare the anxious minds for some impending disaster, to fill their souls with panic, to paralyze their energies. The capture of the one spells the capture of the other. I must have him — dead or alive!"

Pedro Rovara gave a start.

"No effort is being spared, my lord," he stammered. "Every channel is being watched by our secret spies. Not an eel could escape."

The Leopard Prince waved the speaker to silence.

"When the hour of midnight tolls from the steeples of Venice, an attempt upon my life will be made within these very precincts. What measures have you taken to prevent the execution of this plot, Messer Rovara?"

The Chief of the Signori di Notte found himself in the throes of a veritable panic.

"My lord, by whatever supernatural means you may have obtained intelligence otherwise inaccessible —"

"I do not employ superhuman agencies," the Leopard Prince interposed. "The familiars of the secret tribunal do not repeat the blunders of the sbirri. Let it suffice that I know, and that I shall know how to meet it."

"It is not too late to summon assistance," Rovara stammered, shifting uneasily from one foot to the other. "In less than an hour — but then — there are the sentinels —"

"In less than an hour they will be upon us. They are in the arsenal even now. They are but waiting your departure, Messer Rovara. Your gondola does not inspire confidence. As for the sentinels — their throats would be cut ere they could draw a weapon in our defense."

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"My place is at your side, my lord," the Chief of the *shirri* replied, looking about uneasily as if he expected to find the shadows peopled with a murderous band, while he started to divest himself of his mantle.

An arresting hand was placed upon his shoulder.

"Your gondola is waiting, Messer Rovara," spoke the inexorable voice. "You will depart the way you came. Let your steps ring briskly on the flags. It will be music to their ears."

"What will you do, my lord?" stammered the Chief of the *Signori di Notte*, no little affrighted by the words of the man who swayed in his hands the destinies of Venice.

"I shall accord them the welcome, Messer Rovara, that befits their rank," came the sardonic reply. "And — I shall know my enemy."

Rovara, obeying without further demur, reeled from the chamber like a drunken man, and no sooner had his footsteps died away in the night-wrapt corridor than the hood dropped over the lamp and extinguished the light, leaving the chamber of the Grand Inquisitor wrapt in Stygian gloom.

From the steeples of Venice pealed the gongs of midnight.

In the precincts of the arsenal nothing stirred.

Some moments elapsed. The echoes had died to silence.

Now a stealthy footfall fell upon the ear.

It came and stopped and came again.

The scampering of rats in an old, uninhabited building might have produced a similar sound.

Now a door somewhere was slowly turning on its hinges.

The succeeding hush was unbroken by any sound.

A dark-robed figure, standing on the threshold of the chamber of the Inquisitors, peered into the sable gloom.

Snatching a torch from one standing behind him, he raised it aloft. The ruddy light flashed on the table, where, bent over the records scattered thereon, sat the Leopard Prince.

His back was turned upon the intruders.

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He seemed to have fallen asleep over his pursuit.

A fiendish light gleamed in the eyes of the one who appeared to be the leader of the band, as, on tiptoe he crept up to the unconscious occupant of the chamber.

Waving back his companions, he raised on high the gleaming scimitar he gripped in his right hand. For a moment it hovered suspended in the air. Then came a flash, a hiss.

The severed head of the Leopard Prince rolled upon the floor of the chamber.

A spiral of blood spurted and gushed over the assassin, dying crimson his sable robes and dripping from the satin vizor onto the exposed part of his face. The headless trunk reeled for a moment, then toppled onto the floor, where, after a convulsion or two, it lay still.

At the same moment a white blinding light flashed into the chamber, throwing into strong relief the forms of the invaders, and their leader, who was literally covered with gore.

Darkness succeeded almost instantaneously.

As if seized with a panic the invaders fled from the chamber, leaving to its fate the body of their hapless victim and vanished in the blackness of the night.

CHAPTER II

THE SECRET PASSAGE



ON the following morning a cry of terror and dismay echoed through the City of the Sea.

The Leopard Prince had been assassinated during the night in the chamber of the arsenal, where the Three were wont to hold their secret sessions.

An attendant had discovered the headless trunk at daybreak

and had at once conveyed the tidings to Giovanni Gradenigo, the Doge.

Consternation reigned on the piazzas and canals, and the fear in the hearts of the people increased in proportion as the details of the crime, enlarged upon and exaggerated by oral transmission, reached their ears.

Zuan, mingling with the crowds, remained not untouched by the pall that hung over Venice. The blow seemed to have been planned by a master mind and executed with a cunning that defied every effort of the Signori di Notte to discover the assassin. A new wave of crime, following closely upon the heels of a stroke which had paralyzed the people of Venice, plainly showed the trend of coming events.

The shades of evening were falling over the estuary of San Marco. Purple shadows crept up the Euganean Hills, and heavy storm-clouds hovered over the Istrian Alps.

The chimes of the Angelus floated on the evening breeze.

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From San Marco, from San Stefano, from San Cassiano, from San Crisostomo, from San Vitalé from San Erasmo, from San Zenobio, from San Trovaso, dreamy bell-notes pulsed out upon the darkening lagunes. They told man of the redemption of the world by the divine miracle of the incarnation, announced by Gabriel, the Angel of God, to the ears of Mary, blessed among women.

The chimes were taken up by the church of the Frari and the church of the Scalzi, by Santa Maria del Carminé and Santa Maria Formosa. Their echoes floated over the darkening estuary to the island churches, San Nicolo on the Lido and Santa Fosca in Torcello. The campanili of Tremodia and Murano, Chioggia and Mazzorbo, mingled their silvery prayers with the chimes from the City of the Sea.

Night fell with phantom swiftness over the lagunes.

There was no moon. The darkness was profound, unrelieved save by the occasional sheen of distant lightnings that revealed ghostly, vanishing palaces, as Zuan's gondola sped through the oily gloom of the waters.

From the great Canalozzo the gondola turned into one of the narrowest of Venetian waterways. As in the phantasmagoria of a dream, the great, silent houses that bordered the silent, lugubrious channels, flitted past.

At last they came to a landing.

Zuan alighted and dismissed the gondolier.

Then he paused to gain his bearings.

These were the places of misery and want, of hunger and of crime. In this quarter lived the very poorest in Venice, to whose ears the pageants and festas sounded as in hollow mockery. The very pit of the netherworld swarmed about him: gaunt men, *lazzaroni* whose rags scarce hung on their bodies, cripples whose bent limbs wormed beast-like on the stairs of unsavory hovels, women with the faces of witches, outcasts whose eyes were alight with the fires of hunger, children in deformity and pain.

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They breathed their woes into the stranger's face, their rags touched him as he passed. Before a door squatted a cripple, whose twisted and distorted limbs looked like the gnarled twigs of a tree. There was a strong smell of tar and new canvas and the flat odor that rises at high tide.

Traversing this unsavory quarter Zuan entered a narrow lane. A high brick wall frowned upon him on one side. On the other rose shadowy houses, apparently deserted of the living.

After assuring himself that there was no one there but himself, and that no light showed in any of the windows, Zuan cautiously groped his way along in the shadows, pausing now and then, listening attentively and with a certain eagerness.

Save for the distant sound of water activity, which came muffled through the night, all about him was silent. Sometimes this silence was broken by the warning "*Stalé*" of a gondolier, but always, forming a sort of background to the stillness, there was the remote din of the harbor.

In the distance, occasional flickering lights pierced the mist, the lanterns of gondolas passing in the night. Here and there, too, in some remote Rio, the light of a tavern stung the gloom.

Save for these rents in the nocturnal veil, the darkness was punctuated with nothing save the dull glitter of a distant canal, creeping between deserted garden plots.

Arrived beneath the votive shrine of a Madonna, Zuan paused under the eaves of a sinister-looking house and peered up and down the lane.

Not a living creature was to be seen as far as the eye reached.

Some fifty feet beyond, there lay the little piazza, in the centre of which, dimly discernible, the moving statue of the Madonna, dark and sinister, rose into the night.

Just as Zuan was about to step from his concealment, his trained ear caught the stealthy tread of some one creeping down the lane.

Retreating precipitately he waited and watched.

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Something passed him, like a breath in the night.

The scent of jasmin and roses was wafted to his nostrils.

Even ere he realized it, darkness had swallowed up the apparition.

Every nerve strung taut, Zuan stared after the shadowy form that was heading straightway for the little piazza. That her goal was the moving statue he doubted not for a moment. He was about to quit his concealment, to give pursuit, when a second surprise awaited him.

Creeping down the lane there came another — keeping well in the shadow of the overhanging eaves — a man.

He passed Zuan without suspecting his presence. A moment later he too had been swallowed up by the murk.

Zuan waited breathlessly in his concealment.

How many more were coming down the lane to reach the goal which was his own?

The moments seemed like hours.

Nothing happened. The lane was deserted as a cemetery.

A few moments later Zuan stood in the shadow of the statue, his hands passing over the smooth surface for the secret mechanism that controlled its revolutions.

He dared not strike a light. He must rely upon his touch.

But, though his fingers glided deftly over the marble, no responsive movement repaid his efforts.

Despairing, he was about to desist, when suddenly the cylindrical shaft began to revolve, disclosing an aperture sufficiently large for a man to enter.

Without a moment's hesitation Zuan plunged into the chasm.

The marble shaft completed its revolution.

He stood immured in Stygian darkness.

Grimly pitting his will against the dread that assailed him, he groped along with extended hands, dreading every moment lest he might come in contact with the one or the other of the furtive shapes that had entered this well of darkness.

An air of ghostly evil seemed to rise up like a miasma from

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the unexplored depths and the demon silence seemed to conquer him utterly.

The passage sloped downward.

How long he continued his descent, he knew not.

With an intake of the breath he stopped at last.

There came to him, from somewhere, echoing hollowly and remotely, as if from some subterranean cavern, the sound of knocking. Whence it proceeded, he was unable to determine.

Zuan paused, tense, immobile. The knocking ceased.

Without reckoning the danger, he struck his flints and lighted his torch.

Before him stretched a narrow passage, terminating before a massive oaken door, that seemed to bar his farther advance.

With a strange foreboding of evil Zuan turned the knob.

The door groaned slowly outward.

Zuan paused with a start.

He stood in the subterranean corridor of the deserted house in the Sacca della Misericordia.

The door, which had opposed an impenetrable barrier between himself and the past — clinging to which, like a message from the beyond, he had in the silent watches of the night found the shred of silken gossamer web, pointing to the fact that through this passage, contrived for some unknown purpose, Fulvia had departed — stood ajar!

Zuan's eye was immediately struck by the circumstance, that it could be opened only from the outside, the inner surface giving no hint of the existence of a lock.

For a moment Zuan paused, breathless, bewildered, on the threshold, peering into the well of darkness beyond.

There was some one here to-night: a woman and a man! They had entered through the statue of the moving Madonna.

Who was the woman? Who was the man?

What were they doing in these haunted precincts?

Zuan was taking council of himself.

Was he at last at grips with the foe?

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Abruptly and without warning he found himself plunged into the very core of the mystery. An inner voice warned him that he stood on the margin of an arena, wherein strange adversities warred to a strange end. It seemed to him as if some great sluice gate had been raised and a dreadful sense of reboding invaded his soul.

A distant clock chimed out, an old world chime, in keeping with the loneliness of the place into which he had adventured. As the chimes died to silence, it came to him how, in the darkness about him, menace lurked, the shadows of a veiled and evil past. He peopled the blackness with lurking assassins, armed with the murderous knowledge of bygone centuries, armed with invisible weapons that struck down, supernaturally, in the dark.

The silence, intensified by an occasional creaking on the stairs above, grew more oppressive every moment.

Summoning all his courage, Zuan, extinguishing his torch, passed over the threshold, taking the precaution of leaving the door ajar, mounted the stairs on tiptoe, expecting every moment to come in contact with some invisible presence, passed down the corridor and entered the chamber of which he had taken possession upon his return.

In a shadowy recess which commanded a view of the corridor and the night-wrapt landing, he took his seat and waited, in anticipation of some event hovering on the air.

It was very lonely and silent in the deserted house, and the faint lightnings painted strange shapes upon the walls. Distant thunder muttered. The storm was drawing nearer.

Without the slightest heralding sound a black silhouette appeared against the opposite wall, rose higher and vanished. Zuan's brow was damp with perspiration. He became more and more convinced that the impending ordeal would prove too much for him.

His eyes became gradually accustomed to the darkness which was rent by intermittent flashes of lightning. Zuan

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experienced a curious sense of isolation from the world of men. Almost he felt as if he were himself a ghost among ghosts. He dared not stir. Hardly dared he breathe, if he would surprise the intentions of those in whose wake he had followed.

The lightnings became more frequent. Thunder rolled in booming echoes through the heavens. The wind began to rise, to sob through the trees in the garden.

How long he sat there, watching, waiting, he knew not, when he thought he saw a shadowy form standing by the curtain that screened the door, leading into an adjoining chamber.

The shadow materialized and moved forward with a curiously lithe and stealthy gait.

The next moment it was gone and Zuan wondered whether it had been a trick of his imagination, or whether it had been actually there.

Never had he experienced so overwhelming a sense of some sinister presence, harmful to body and soul, which seemed to impregnate the very atmosphere.

Zuan tried to beat the phantoms back by the sheer power of his will. An hour of watching and waiting and communing with himself passed drearily. With the passing of each moment his mood became increasingly morbid. A score of times he started nervously, thinking he had heard the sound of bare feet upon the floor behind him, the suppressed breathing of some death-dealing ghoul.

What unseen intelligence controlled these manifestations?

Again he waited, in hushed, tense watchfulness.

Though intrepid by nature he cowered before that which he knew he must face in the gloom. Darkness is the most powerful weapon of the unknown.

Summoning all his reasoning powers, his hand gripping the hilt of his poniard, Zuan watched the curtain in a curious, speculative way.

The seemingly reasonless dread which had touched him a few moments ago, had left him. Once more his eye was steady, his hand firm. Admitting to himself that he was curiously sensitive, he at last arose.

Restlessly he paced up and down in the darkness. The heavy pile of the Persian carpet deadened his footsteps. Now and then he paused in his restless patrol, clenching his hands and inhaling deeply. Then a puzzled expression came stealing over his face which changed to one of alert suspicion. His mouth tightened in a thin, straight line and he raised a hand to his brow with a gesture of bewilderment.

Something, some one, was in the room. He felt its presence like something palpable. This thing that moved down upon him through the gloom was nothing of flesh and blood. Some ghoulisn presence was here, something malignant and harmful to human life. Sounds, one by one, began to detach themselves out of the silence. Vague creakings struck his listening ear, sounds as of stealthy footsteps on the stairs. Perchance he was magnifying these manifestations out of proportion to their actual significance.

The shadow vanished as it had come, seemingly dissolving into space. Yet the unseen presence could no longer be denied.

With a supreme effort Zuan controlled himself, refraining from crying out: Who is there?

Rooted to the spot, from a shadowy embrasure he gazed around the chamber.

Again, as on the night of his arrival, the pungent odor of jasmin and roses assailed his nostrils.

A strange numbness began to invade him, for which he could find no satisfactory solution. A strange fear was upon him. Terrible, poignant things seemed to inhabit the gloom, moving about him.

A cloister bell shrilled through the night.

Opposite a large mirror he stopped, pervaded with a strange sense of unreality.

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Against the sable pall he saw himself trembling on the brink of Hell.

What was that?

The mirror did not reflect his image. Something else was there — a shadowy presence filled the frame, surrounded by a black well of darkness. Two eyes peered searchingly into the chamber, as if to seek out its solitary occupant.

Zuan had seen enough.

With a bound he stood before the frame from which the mirror had miraculously vanished.

Two voices mingled in one delirious cry.

"Fulvia!"

"Zuan!"

Then something terrible happened.

A piercing shriek resounded through the chamber.

Two shadowy arms were thrust from the well of darkness, drawing the woman into the abysmal gloom beyond.

Ere Zuan knew what had happened, the mirror, its springs released, stood in its former place, drowning the despairing wail that died away in the vaulted passage.

For a moment Zuan stood as one dazed.

Then, with a crash, the mirror was splintered into a thousand fragments by a blow from his dagger's hilt.

Leaping into the vaulted passage, enveloped by Stygian gloom, he gave pursuit.

Heedless of the dangers that encompassed his every step, heedless of the consequences of his daring, he rushed onward. He stumbled, fell, picked himself up, resumed the chase, without stopping to light his torch.

Suddenly the ground vanished from under his feet.

With a choked outcry he fell though space and lay still.—

When the pearly dawn crept over the sky, Zuan stirred and opened his eyes. His limbs seemed paralyzed. His lips were parched.

Raising his aching head he looked about, bewildered, where



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he lay embedded in the soft mud of a dried-up canal bed.

To this circumstance alone he owed his life, as he fell through the trap-door in the floor of the passage.

One by one the events of the night passed in review before his reviving memory. It seemed to him as if he had lived æons since he had entered the shaft of the moving Madonna.

With an effort Zuan extricated himself from the slime and mire, in which his footsteps sank as in a quicksands.

A terrible look passed into his eyes, as he hailed a passing gondola.

The lightning flash which had revealed to him the woman, had also revealed to him the man.

He had stood eye in eye with Lucio Strozzi.

CHAPTER III

DEAD SEA FRUIT



FULVIA, after nights of watchfulness and wrestling with a tumult of new thoughts and emotions, no longer dreams but the realities of life, was looking out upon the darkening estuary, which was slowly fading into the purple veils of dusk. More than once, under the influence of some undefinable impulse, she tiptoed to the curtain that masked the door leading into the corridor, as if listening for the approach of one who must come to her, unless truth had changed to falsehood.

The ivory pallor of her face gave silent testimony that the events of the past days had not passed without leaving their impress upon her. Since that terrible night in the deserted house, when he had snatched her from the very arms of the man she loved, Strozzi had not entered her presence and his studied absence proved even more disquieting than any retribution he might have seen fit to visit upon her head.

At last she had stood, eye in eye, with Zuan. The same purpose had prompted each to visit the Buen Retiro of their dreams. Her intuition had not played her false. But closely upon the thought that a second attempt might succeed where the first had failed, there came a dire misgiving lest, following up his clue, Zuan should venture into the very stronghold of his enemy.

It was well that even a momentary relief was vouchsafed to her, a temporary lull as it were between two cataclysms. She had fathomed Strozzi's immeasurable treachery. She knew a blow was impending, though its nature and its object were as yet concealed from her.

She must see Zuan, whatever the risk of the venture. From his own lips she must learn the dark mystery which had shattered their lives.

There was one whose watchfulness surrounded her, one who seemed to have conceived for her a semi-religious attachment, of which the Middle Ages have left us many examples, side by side with devotions of a very different sort, Stiatta, the castellan.

The concern for the woman he guarded as the mythical dragon guards the hidden treasure, sharpened the wits of Fulvia's gaoler and, while he accumulated the proofs of the impending danger, he silently prepared for the means of defeating it.

Could she, apparently so unconcerned, but realize her plight, could she but be made to see that Strozzi's jilted passion had turned to bitter hate! What Stiatta dreaded was that Fulvia, lulled in seeming security, would not believe the plot to be as black as he knew it was. Even if he succeeded in making her realize the truth — what, if she declined [his good offices to save her?

To Stiatta it seemed little short of a miracle that so far she had passed scatheless through the horrors that surrounded her. But the crimson tide was creeping ever higher. For some unknown reason Strozzi had spared her life till now. Perchance it was but the delay of the cat that plays with the mouse which it can kill at any moment.

Stiatta was no blind fool, even though his eyes seemed closed to his master's perfidy and cunning. Did he not know that the white beauty of Yaga had seared Strozzi's soul? Had he not seen his baleful glances of late rest upon Fulvia

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with the weight of doom? Only the day before, in the great hall, as all were rising from the evening repast, had he not overheard him whispering to one of his bravi, nodding in the direction of her chamber?

One evening, when the sun had sunk in angry splendor that ate through the clouds like sullen fire and night, dark and dismal, had fallen upon the canals, Stiatta had conducted into Fulvia's chamber a monk whose austere demeanor and uncompromising silence had strangely impressed themselves on the castellan's mind.

A half-choked, sobbing outcry had reached Stiatta's listening ear as he waited and watched before the door of Fulvia's chamber.

Who was the strange friar whose presence seemed so to affect the mood of his mistress?

Strain his ear as he would, not a sound penetrated to him from within.

Stiatta dared not leave his post, lest his terrible master should surprise the twain and, finding his confidence betrayed, hold him, the watcher, to account.

How long the strange friar tarried!

Stiatta chafed under the restraint.

If this monk were some disguised lover! If he, Stiatta, had been duped!

Now he heard whispers. They seemed to approach the door before which he watched.

"Three nights hence, at the fourth hour, a gondola will lie in waiting at Madonna dell' Orto. You can trust the gondolier —"

Again silence supervened.

In vain Stiatta strained his listening ear.

Three nights hence — at Madonna dell' Orto — what did it all mean?

Now the castellan heard the woman approach the secret panel through which the monk had entered and, quitting his

post, he dashed down the corridor, as if the fiend were on his heels.

Stricken dumb, Fulvia staggered back against the panel, through which the monk had disappeared. She would have fallen, had she not gripped a chair for support.

She was pale as death, trembling like an aspen.

Before her stood Strozzi.

"Ah!" he said softly. "I knew not your confessor was in the habit of assisting in your orisons. Your peccadillos must needs weigh heavily upon you, Fulvia *mia*, to prompt so holy a man to so perilous a pilgrimage. As for Messer Stiatta — he has my orders to detain him."

Fulvia watched him wide-eyed.

"To detain him?" she cried desperately.

"Even so, Fulvia *mia*," Strozzi replied suavely. "I, too, would ease my conscience and win absolution, and incidentally obtain an indulgence for that which is slumbering in the bosom of time."

Fulvia had never stirred from the panel by which Zuan had departed. After listening covertly and no sound reaching her ear, her faith in Stiatta was restored. Nevertheless she fought down her terror, knowing how much depended on her retaining her presence of mind. How much of her interview Strozzi had overheard, she knew not, nor how much he had seen.

Strozzi had been watching her narrowly.

"Deem you in all truth," he continued suavely, feasting his eyes on her terror, "that I mean to throw you into the arms of the first beggar who covets your white beauty? All these years have I starved — starved at the gates of paradise. But now, by God, I mean to earn my reward!"

As he advanced slowly towards her, terror grew upon Fulvia and she retreated from him, step for step. He paused, making no attempt to follow, contenting himself to watch her.

She extended pleading hands.

"Oh, let me go! Give me back my youth, my life! Let

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me go hide away from the face of the world, in a convent." Her plea died in a sob.

"A convent?" Strozzi laughed hysterically. "Your chastity clothes you well, Fulvia *mia*!"

"What do you mean?" she cried desperately.

Strozzi gave a shrug.

"You are beautiful, Fulvia *mia*, and to-night you shall be mine. I craved you even before that other set eyes upon you," he continued gloomily, "he whose image is graven in your heart. You spurned my love! You would have none of me! Maddened by desire I took you from him. It is I who willed your lover's ruin, his downfall — for love of you —"

"You!"

Step for step she retreated, a terror too great for words in her eyes. Then she covered her face with her hands.

"To-night," the voice continued, "I shall bend or break you! To-night you shall drain the goblet to the dregs. I hardly know what has restrained this hand so long from grasping that which is its own by right of might, since no appeal avails."

She listened to his words as if turned to stone.

"I have offered you all I have — all within my grasp. I have offered you a throne — the throne of the proudest prince on earth! You would have none of it — none of me —"

She raised imploring hands.

"You know my heart is another's — one I must love in life and death and for all time. Have pity on me!"

Farther and farther she cowered away from him.

"Come to me!" hissed the voice.

"Never!"

"Never?"

Strozzi advanced slowly, and as he did, abject terror threatened to rob her of her strength. Her limbs seemed to grow numb. Her tongue clove to the roof of her mouth.

"You who have dwelt beneath this roof should know there is no escape from my will."

His calm was terrible, his glance like a scorching ray. His voice became more sibilant.

"I have been ambitious, reckless, cruel. Whatever I am, that I am through you. Never have I sued for favors before as I am suing now, but I shall sue no more."

His passion-strained voice shuddered into silence, while, advancing step by step, he stood over the cowering form. Fulvia's eyes dilated, like the eyes of a sleepwalker. Her hand went to her throat.

For a moment Strozzi watched her in silence.

Then passion swept him off his feet and he seized her fiercely by her white, supple wrists.

"Your eyes drive me mad," he hissed, "your lips taunt me! I will suffer this agony of desire no longer."

"What of Yaga? What of the woman of San Sepolcro?" she gasped, gaining courage from despair. "Can they satisfy you no longer?"

"I am satiated with their kind," he replied. "The endearments of wantons are odious. It is your white, stainless soul that lures me to the brink of madness. Your undefiled lips shall respond to mine!"

Helplessly enmeshed in the toils of the man who had her lover in his power, Fulvia stood as one petrified.

There was an expression of fear and loathing in her eyes as she extended her white hands to ward him off.

A baleful light shone in Strozzi's eyes.

Releasing her, he struck a gong.

Fulvia cowered on the ottoman, watching in dread and fear. Silently a door opened and Stietta appeared on the threshold. He avoided glancing in the direction of Fulvia, as he inquired into his master's pleasure.

"Is everything ready?" Strozzi turned to his henchman.

"Everything is ready, my lord."

"When you hear the gong,—you have your orders."

With a bow, Stietta departed.

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Strozzi turned to the woman.

"Come to me, Fulvia *mia*," he purred in that silken voice which she hated as death.

Fulvia shrank from him, wordless, pale to the lips.

"Very well!" his voice sank to a hiss. "It is you who have brought it upon him — so be it! This derelict who has feasted at the board where I have starved,—how he shall pay, how he shall pay! Listen, Fulvia *mia*! What do you hear?"

Fulvia stood in an attitude of alert and fearful attention. Strozzi watched her with remorseless gaze.

A moan came and died through the silence.

Fulvia was pale as death. Her first thought was that Stietta had betrayed the friar; that he had caused him to be seized in the dark passage.

Strozzi turned to the woman. Her eyes were unnaturally dark by contrast with the pallor of her face.

The succeeding silence was almost uncanny.

"The usual respite before the question," spoke the evil voice, "ere the screws are set in motion —"

Suddenly, from somewhere out of the darkness came a groan.

Fulvia leaped to her feet, clutching frantically at Strozzi's tunic.

"Merciful God! Spare him! Spare him!"

Strozzi regarded her from between half-shut lids.

"The roles have been miraculously reversed, Fulvia *mia*. It is Stietta who is shriving a penitent. Will you listen to his confession, Fulvia *mia*?"

The groans grew louder, more insistent.

"Stop him! Stop him!" shrieked Fulvia.

"Stietta has but just begun. Wait but till your lover's bones and sinews begin to crack, Fulvia *mia*,—"

"Oh!" she wailed piteously. "I cannot bear it! Do what you will with me, but spare him. Ah! Monster! Have you no pity?"

"Pity?" he laughed scornfully. "What pity have you shown to me?" He leaped to the door and tore it open. "Harder! Harder!" he shrieked deliriously down the night-wrapt corridor. "Wrench him to pieces."

"Stop! For God's sake, stop!" shrieked the woman, dragging herself towards him on her knees.

"Speak but the word and your lover goes free. Persist — and by God — he dies!"

A stifled scream came to Fulvia's ears.

"Spare him! Spare him!"

"You hesitate?"

"Do with me as you will, but save him!"

Strozzi, his lips a thin, straight line, struck the gong.

Fulvia collapsed upon the ottoman, a crumpled heap, burying her face in her hands.

The sounds of torture ceased.

Strozzi locked the door and stood, bending over her where she lay, her whole body quivering with the frenzy of her emotions.

His brow was dark as a thundercloud.

He inhaled sibilantly.

"You hate me as ever?" he said. "I should have known! Very well! So be it!"

Leaping at her he tried to sweep her into his embrace. She fled shrieking to the door and beat madly upon it.

"Stiatta!" she cried. "Stiatta!"

Strozzi was upon her.

"Merciful God! Stiatta!"

The name broke from her lips in a shrill, frenzied scream. Strozzi had seized her.

A low wail died on her lips.

Everything was turning black before her eyes, as she felt his loathsome kisses on her throat, her neck, her lips.

"Let me go, fiend!" she cried, struggling frantically to release herself. Her resistance maddened him all the more.

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He held her in a vise of steel, as the words hissed from between his clenched teeth.

"I plead no longer! For once and all time we shall see who is the master here — you or I! Too long have I temporized. Nay, Fulvia *mia!* Your struggles will not avail you this time!"

He was dragging her towards the ottoman.

She fought desperately, though her limbs felt paralyzed and her terrible fate loomed up darkly before her.

Never in life would she submit to this fiend.

Soundlessly a panel receded. Stiatta peered into the chamber, a mallet in his sinewy hands.

As Strozzi drew the desperately struggling woman towards the couch, the castellan crept stealthily into the chamber, crouching behind the ottoman.

Another moment and he stood behind the fiend, drew himself up and raised the mallet with both hands.

A dull thud, followed by a short, guttural cry, testified to the efficacy of the blow. Strozzi crashed to the floor as if struck by lightning and lay still.

In the extremity of her terror Fulvia did not immediately realize what had happened. But, when her gaze fell upon Stiatta, she leaped away from him as if she had seen an adder in her path.

Her eyes flashed fire.

"You!" she turned upon him, an ill-repressed savagery in her tone. "It is thus you repay my trust!"

"Donna Fulvia!" Stiatta stammered. "Donna Fulvia! It is I who felled this fiend."

Fulvia stroked her white brow as if she were suddenly awakening from some dreadful nightmare.

She looked at Stiatta, and from him her gaze wandered to the lifeless form of Strozzi.

Suddenly the import of it all flashed upon her and she grew deadly pale.

"What of the — friar?"

The castellan bent over the apparently lifeless form of Strozzi. There was murder in his eyes.

"The friar departed, long ago, Donna Fulvia."

"Departed — Stiatta?"

She swayed dizzily and extended her hands as if she were about to fall.

Stiatta gazed gloomily at the prostrate form of Strozzi.

"Did I not lay my life, my services at your feet, Donna Fulvia?" he gasped hoarsely. "Did I not vow to serve you in the name of the saint? The friar is safe —"

"But the groans, I heard —"

"The lord Strozzi himself was deceived. Punishment was being meted out to one of his refractory menials."

"Thanks to the saints."

Her voice broke.

Stiatta gripped the mallet fiercely.

"Only this, Donna Fulvia, stood between you and dishonor! Let me finish him, here and now, where he lies in his iniquity."

Gliding to the side of the prostrate man he raised the mallet with a muttered oath.

Ere the blow descended, Fulvia was at his side.

"I will have no murder, Stiatta! No matter what his sins. There comes a day of reckoning."

"Ah — when his black soul will burn to crisp in purgatory. Nevertheless — consider, Donna Fulvia. If he wakes you are lost. Fly, while it is time — and let me settle with this fiend."

He spurnt the prostrate form with the tip of his steel boot.

The next moment both, Stiatta and Fulvia, turned pale as death and the mallet shook in Stiatta's nerveless grip.

Strozzi had opened his eyes and was staring, first at the one, then at the other.

CHAPTER IV

THE TRAP



A**FTER** the panel had closed behind him, the disguised monk cautiously groped his way down the narrow, winding stairs of the shaft, immersed in Stygian darkness.

The air was foul, charged with mephitic exhalations from a stagnant canal, and Zuan breathed with difficulty, pausing now and

then to listen for a sign of pursuit.

He took care to count the steps in his descent, in order not to pass the secret door in the wall which had admitted him, the steps continuing below the water level into the vaults of the palace, unexplored of mortal eyes.

Zuan suddenly paused with a quick intake of the breath.

With a sinking of the heart, which had an almost paralyzing effect upon him, he realized that he was not alone. Some one was there beside him. He felt a hand upon his arm.

"Not this way," a warning whisper struck his ear, and he felt a grip upon his arm. It tightened, as Zuan, with his unseen guide, continued his descent, till they arrived in a passage so narrow that Zuan's shoulders came in contact with the wall on either side.

When they came to the end of the corridor his guide, opening a door, hardly discernible in the blackness of the wall, spoke:

"We have no farther to go. Pass in and wait my return."

For a moment Zuan hesitated, when he found himself literally thrust in and the door behind him fell into its lock with a sharp click.

Turning with a swift sense of danger Zuan tried the lock.

The door was fast. He was in the power of his enemy!

Zuan stood rooted to the floor, as if turned to stone. The dire import of the situation flashed upon his mind. He was about to pay the penalty of his daring. What would be Fulvia's fate?

Mechanically he struck two flints and ignited a torch, which he carried for all emergencies.

He was in a cell of singular shape and construction, a dungeon such as he had never seen before.

It was low and circular. The solid masonry of the walls was unrelieved by any aperture. It contained neither window nor door, save the one by which he had entered.

Suspended from the blackened ceiling was an iron chain to which was attached a lantern in a black, iron frame. It contained some oil and a floating wick. To save his torch, Zuan transferred its feeble light to the lantern.

Then he began to examine the walls. They seemed to form the foundation of the massive pile. Nothing short of an earthquake could rend a fissure in the rock. He looked for some hidden trap-door. The floor was solid as the walls.

Zuan by this time was perfectly collected. He realized his position and knew he had been betrayed. He had been lured into this secret dungeon to disappear without a trace.

Death he could meet. But to know Fulvia doomed to a life of wretchedness was a thought that almost upset his reason.

The furniture in the place was scant, consisting of a table, a chair, and some rushes, upon which some criminal or unfortunate, doomed to the same death, might have dreamed his last dream. Strozzi did not deem it incumbent upon himself to ease the last moments of a dying wretch.

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Knowing the temper of his enemy, Zuan did not deceive himself with regard to his fate.

Again he examined the dungeon, testing every crevice, every stone.

There was not the smallest chance of escape.

After a few moments Zuan made a discovery that caused the blood in his veins to freeze.

A portion of the stone floor, barely touched by the rays of the lantern, showed evidences of having recently been inundated. His groping fingers came in contact with relics of ooze and slime, deposited by a recent alluvium, and relinquished after the water had receded to its natural channel.

This discovery almost drove him mad.

This chamber wherein he was destined to suffer a living death, ere the grim Master of the Scythe claimed him for his own, was situated below the sea level. During high tide the water that laved the base of the palace crept into his prison, inundating the vault.

Zuan dropped nervelessly into the chair, giving himself over to despair.

The end had come, at last — the end of life and love — ambition and strife.

Evil had triumphed. Venice was lost. Fulvia was lost. He was lost.

As a drowning man sees the events of his life pass before his eyes in one swift phantasmagoria, ere its last spark is extinguished, Zuan reviewed his own past, pondering the monstrous tale of treachery and deception which Fulvia had poured into his listening ear.

From that fateful hour in the distant past when their Buen Retiro during the silent watches of the night had been invaded by a band of masked sbirri who were to bring him, Zuan Castello, before the Three, charged with treason against the Venetian state, to the moment of their parting, but one brief hour since, Fulvia had bared her heart to him, had revealed

to his shuddering gaze a vista of treachery and iniquity, unequalled in the annals of mankind.

Waking from a swoon, during which they had carried her through the secret passage and which proved the precursor of an illness that brought her near the brink of the grave, she had found herself in a sumptuously furnished chamber of the Strozzi palace, attended by a sister of the Misericordia who administered to her slightest wants. Of Strozzi himself she saw nothing during this twilight period of her existence. When he came, it was to announce to her his, Zuan's, death, by the axe of the executioner.

Deliberately withholding from her any knowledge he had of the false accusation, anonymously conveyed through the Lions' Mouths, and seemingly substantiated by the theft of the Dalmatian charts, Strozzi had, in time, revealed himself the fiend he was, counting on her helplessness and panic, to make her pliable to his desires. When his innuendos met with rebuff, he had resorted to a mock ceremony, performed during Fulvia's illness by one of his familiars, who had donned the garb of a monk.

Unable to break her resistance, he had slowly changed from the lover to the gaoler, setting over her one who was about her constantly. Even her dreams were not her own. Since Zuan's miraculous return, matters had taken a turn for the worse. Discarding every semblance of restraint, Strozzi was determined to break her resistance, even though his love had turned to hate and she feared the worst.

Twice she had fled to the deserted house in the Sacca della Misericordia, driven by longing and despair. There she hoped she would find the lost companion of her dreams.

It had come true! But Strozzi, driven to desperation in the extremity of his plight, had dogged her every step, resolved to prevent a meeting between the man he had wronged and the woman who had stung his passions, yet would not yield to entreaty or force. His, Zuan's, death, had been decreed from

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the moment of their first meeting. If, for some unguessed reason, the suspended blade had not fallen upon Zuan's head ere now, it was but to make the execution of his vengeance the more complete. She, too, was doomed, unless a miracle intervened.

It had come to pass.

Zuan ground his teeth, as he reviewed the hopelessness of his plight.

The arch-fiend had prevailed.

Would Fulvia ever learn his fate and how he had died in this lonely cell, deserted of the living? What fate was awaiting her, when three days hence she entered the waiting gondola at the water-stairs of Madonna dell' Orto! If she should fall into Yaga's hands! If these two should meet!

Zuan arose with a groan and beat the walls with his hands. Were there no lightnings to strike the miscreant who had made himself master of his destiny?

The hours dragged on. The thickness of the massive walls did not permit even a sound to penetrate into this dismal abode. Men had been known to escape from the leaden roofs, from the *piombi*. From this abode of death there was no escape. In this place Night and Morning had no meaning. And then — the rising tide!

He seemed to have spent an eternity in his cell, vainly groping for some ray of light in the supervening gloom.

Even to meet his enemy face to face, to crush the life out of the arch-traitor, this betrayer of everything human and divine, had been denied to him.

Zuan heard a slow grinding sound.

Startled he looked about. For a time, the source remained hidden to him. Now a breath of air fanned his cheek. He looked up.

The cylindrical roof began to revolve. A small opening appeared and within its frame appeared a face, pale, sinister, passion-distorted.

It was the face of Lucio Strozzi.

Zuan leaped up like electrified, as their eyes met.

"Traitor and assassin!" he cried, straining forward as if about to leap at the other's throat.

A jarring laugh shuddered from Strozzi's lips.

"My lord Zuan, you are no longer of the living. Your hours are numbered. Donna Fulvia will be consoled —"

Ere Zuan could retort, the cylindrical roof completed its revolution and shut out the face of his enemy.

Strozzi's words struck Zuan with direst import, though they but confirmed his misgivings.

He was in one of those secret dungeons, such as abounded in the old Venetian palaces, where the *nobili* administered their own justice or visited retribution on the head of the guilty and guiltless alike, a dungeon whence there is no more escape than from the sealed, leaden coffin, deposited beneath six feet of sod. If he did not perish of hunger, he would doubtlessly drown like a rat, when the tide began sweeping into the canals. No human being would hear his last sigh. No God would hear his last prayer. Almost within call of his beloved he would perish, and, to the last great day, when Hell would yield up its secrets to the archangel sitting in judgment, his fate would remain a mystery.

Despairingly his eyes were fixed upon the lamp.

After the oil was consumed he would be engulfed in Stygian gloom, for, day and night were all one in this den of perdition, and, once darkness settled upon him, it would be the darkness that preceded death.

Zuan's thoughts raced at fever speed.

There was the cylindrical roof of the dungeon!

He dismissed the thought almost as quickly as it flashed through his brain.

From the floor of the cell it was impossible to reach the ceiling.

By placing the chair on the table he would be able to just

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touch it. They would never support his weight. Unfamiliar as he was with the mechanism of the hidden spring, which doubtlessly was on the other side of his dungeon, his efforts would be utterly futile.

Zuan's situation was even embittered by Strozzi's parting shaft. His words boomed in his ears like the knell of doom.

He recalled Fulvia's every word, every gesture, every caress, and with the memory his despair increased.

There must be some escape from this abode of death!

How he cursed his folly for having ventured single-handed into the lair of his enemy!

Then the certainty of his impending doom stung him to despair. He beat his fists upon the cold surface of the stone, lacerating his hands. His fingers groped along the wall for some hidden spring. The cold stone mocked his frantic appeals. And the oil in the lamp was ebbing fast.

Suddenly a sound more ominous than anything he had yet experienced in this dismal abode struck his ears, and he felt his limbs stiffen under the stark terror that invaded his soul.

It was the slow drip-drip of water, seeping through the stone, as the tide rose in the canals. Slowly at first, then a little faster, the water began to invade the dungeon.

Unafraid of death, this manner of drowning in the Stygian gloom of his prison cell nevertheless filled him with unspeakable dread. He thought of stopping the crevices through which drop succeeded drop as minute succeeds minute. There was no more stopping the one than stopping the other.

Inch by inch the water was creeping up to his ankles, and the foul air which the rising tide drove upwards pained his lungs, as if a hot iron had seared them.

He looked around the dungeon, to discover past evidences of the invasion of the tide. The dampness of the stone had obliterated the traces of former inundations. But the steady drip-drip was as a tocsin of death, cruel beyond all imaginings.

As he thought the flow of the water had ceased. The moment he knew his ears had deceived him. Relentless, able, the tide was rising about him. He plunged his hand in it and foul things fixed on his fingers. He heard it splash against the stones and he prayed, as he had never before. Any death but this, in this foul tide and stifling darkness!

Lying himself up on the rickety table he gloomily watched the drops, as they oozed from the walls and fell, relentlessly, one, into the grimy tide, in which his own distorted face was darkly reflected beneath the feeble rays of the lamp in which the oil grew less and less.

But, as if to mock his anguish, as if contenting itself with playing upon his terror, the drip-drip began to decrease, eventually ceased altogether. After hours that seemed endless it began alternately to rise, to ebb again, leaving the walls utterly drenched with slime and filth. If sleep it had to come to him sitting where he was, upon the lonely dry spot in the cell, the table.

The foul air in the vault, incarcerated beyond a chance of escape, accomplished at last what nothing else could do. His head drooped, his eyelids closed. Perchance sleep was the precursor of death. God pity Fulvia!

Even sleep seemed impossible in this den of perdition. He swayed to and fro upon his uneasy pallet and, with a sigh sought himself just as he was about to fall on the wet floor.

The suddenness of the exertion roused Zuan to the reality of his fate. He looked about, bewildered, as if, during the spell of unconsciousness, memory had been obliterated. Finding where he was, he gave a groan. The little flame burning on the floating wick expired, leaving him in Stygian darkness.

CHAPTER V

BEYOND THE GRAVE



WHAT sound was that?

The narrow door, through which he had entered the vault, was slowly turning on its hinges.

A masked and muffled form stood on the threshold throwing the gleam of a masked lantern around the cell and raising a warning hand.

"Not a word, my lord, if you value your life," he whispered, as he espied Zuan swaying on his improvised pallet.

Zuan stared, uncomprehending, at the fateful shape that stood out, a figure of gloom, against the gloomier background of the cell.

The masked apparition descended to the floor of the cell, and approached its occupant.

"We have met before, my lord! I am Sordello, the bravo."

"Sordello," Zuan repeated absently. "What is your business here?"

"My lord," said the bravo in subdued, husky accents, as if every word he uttered gave him pain, "I have come to take you from this den of death."

Zuan listened without stirring, as if something had suddenly snapped in his brain.

"You — the bravo — have come to save my life?" he

spoke in a strange, metallic voice, stroking the hair back from his clammy brow. "Has the fiend turned saint?"

Sordello gave a sob.

"The lord Strozzi is absent. Yet we have no time to waste, my lord, though there are some things you must know — which I did not divulge when we met in that fateful hour at San Sepolcro. By profession, my lord, I am a fencer," Sordello continued in wrapt tones, as one who reminisces. "I came to Venice from Padua, to seek employment. One night, during a tavern brawl, the lord Strozzi chanced to pass near a spot where three bravi were gasping out their lives beneath my steel. Impressed with my daring, for they were three to one, he took me into his service. At a fete, up the Brenta, I met her who has gone from me forever."

Sordello paused for a moment, trying to steady his voice.

"We loved each other and hoped to be united by the bonds of marriage, when, one evening as we were returning from San Erasmo, the lord Strozzi set eyes upon Fiamma."

"Who then was Gulnare?" Zuan interposed.

"The name she seems to have assumed after she, too, entered the service of the lord Strozzi," Sordello explained, with meaning.

Zuan gave a nod and the bravo continued:

"Being overmuch absent in the service of my master I was kept in ignorance of his clandestine visits to the house where, since the death of her mother, Fiamma lived with an old servant, nor did I know then, that, time and again, she repelled his advances, but, dreading the consequences, once I learned the truth, kept from me the facts."

Sordello paused in his narrative and drew a deep breath.

"One day, some one whispered into my ear a tale that caused the blood in my veins to freeze. On the following evening, arriving at Fiamma's abode earlier than my wont, I collided with one who was leaving the house by stealth. It

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was dark and he wore a mask. Blinded by jealousy and fury I struck and he dropped in his tracks. When I tore off his mask, I stared into a strange face. Later I discovered the hellish deception practiced upon me by the man whose bread I ate. Finding his assaults upon Fiamma's virtue futile, his ever fertile brain concocted a scheme by which he hoped to get her into his power, a scheme worthy of the fiend himself. It was by his instruction one of his hirelings whispered the tale into my credulous ear. Then he deliberately consigned one of his own retainers to his doom, by despatching him to Fiamma's abode with a message at the very hour when, as his spies had informed him, I was hastening there on my errand of vengeance, knowing I would slay whomsoever I should meet. Meanwhile he had instructed the *sbirri*, who waited in ambush. The deed done, they were upon me. Not satisfied with one victim, they seized Fiamma. On two barges they took us away. Fiamma was innocent. She had committed no wrong. I was taken to the *piombi*, later under the leaden roofs. In vain were my frantic inquiries about Fiamma's fate. There came the usual trial before the secret tribunal, the inevitable sentence of death. I cared no longer for myself! But — she — Fiamma! What had they done with her? "

Again Sordello paused, breathing hard, as if the recital of the wrongs he had suffered proved too much for him.

"I was returned to my prison, there to await the hour of execution. On the eveuing preceding the fateful day the lord Strozzi entered my cell. The heat was so intense, I thought I should go mad in another moment. My attempts at escape had been fruitless. Now I sat down on the rough stool, abandoning myself to sombre meditations; then, as the heat grew more and more stifling, threatening to scorch my very brain, I bounded up and strode from one window to the other. From the one I could see the lagune, beyond it the Lido and the Adriatic, lying still and glassy in the breathless intensity of the summer heat. From the other I looked across tiled

roofs and caught a peep at the giants on the Clock Tower hammering out the hour."

Zuan listened with bated breath.

"Whatever it was the lord Strozzi read in my eyes, he hastened to inform me there were those outside whom he could summon, if need be. Indifferent to my own, I inquired about Fiamma's fate. The lord Strozzi then informed me that, as an accessory to the crime, she, too, was under sentence of death, but execution in her instance by special clemency of the Three was to be deferred until after I had been strangled between the pillars. I fell upon my knees, I begged, I implored him to save her. No one knew better than he that she was guiltless of any crime. 'It is not what I believe,' he said darkly, 'but what the secret tribunal holds. She stands accused of having lured a stranger to her house with dark intent. Corpses tell no tales,' he concluded with a sneer. I know not, my lord, why I did not strangle him on the spot. At last he held out a faint gleam of hope. The state required a tool with the aid of which Venice would rid herself of her secret enemies, men too high for the axe of the executioner, or the noose of the hangman to reach, men who could not be tried for treason, because no tribunal would convict them."

Sordello paused, moistening his dry lips.

After a time he continued:

"The lord Strozzi hinted, by accepting the assignment and all it implied, the hatred, fear and contempt of mankind, I had it in my power to purchase Fiamma's freedom. My task accomplished, she was to be returned to the world, and we were at liberty to go wherever the spirit prompted. In my despair I accepted his offer. I did the work! I did it well."

"What of Fiamma?"

"It is of this my lord, I come to speak. In like manner, as I learned but two nights ago from Pulcio, the dwarf, the lord Strozzi importuned the woman. She had stung his passions. My release was to be purchased by her surrender. Her part

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in the task for which I had been chosen was to lure the marked victim to the chambers he had fitted up for her in the Convent of San Sepolcro. At a certain signal Fiamma, on one pretense or another, left the chamber. I, entering unseen through the secret panel, despatched the victim."

"Did neither of you suspect the other?" queried Zuan, stern and saturnine.

"Fiamma never suspected the bravo to be her lover. Her own disguise was so adroit, that, never seeing her face, nor hearing her voice, I did not dream who was my associate."

"Did she never address you? Did you never address her?"

"I had sworn a terrible oath, on penalty of never beholding her face again, my lord, never, under any pretext to address her or to speak in her presence. Fiamma had, doubtlessly, been compelled to do the same. She was never present at the death of the victim. We did this thing, each to save the other, she, to save me from the foul den in which I was supposed to rot, I, to save her from a like fate. One evening — it was to be our last — our fate overtook us. Never will I forget the look in her eyes, after she tore the mask from my face. The rest is known to you, my lord. They took her from the water on the following day. God help me! I was too late! She never learned the truth!"

Sordello's voice broke in a sob.

"My lord, are you then resolved to die that you are tempting fate in this foul den?" he spoke at last, after having regained his composure.

The words were more directly addressed to Zuan who, now thoroughly aroused and awake, had listened to Sordello's tale as one in a trance.

"Gulnare dead! By her own hand! And she so young — so fair!"

A tear moistened his eye, as Zuan extended his hand to the bravo.

"I thank you, Sordello!" he said, closing his other hand

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over that of the bravo, which lay shuddering in his own. "I have looked death in the face, but never have I passed a night of such anguish as this. Lead the way!"

They quitted the dungeon, Sordello preceding Zuan through an intricate labyrinth of corridors and galleries with which the Strozzi palace was honeycombed, up and down narrow, winding stairs, till they came to a low, narrow door, which Sordello opened with the aid of a key which he took from his doublet.

A *sirocco* was brewing and Stygian darkness enveloped them as they emerged upon a landing. A covered gondola awaited them. Zuan entered the *felzé* and Sordello took the oar.

A moment later the gloomy walls of the Strozzi palace had been swallowed up by the darkness, as the gondola sped to its goal through the night-wrapt waterways.

CHAPTER VI

A MASTER OF GUILF



EVER, thought Stiatta, had Strozzi, his master, displayed so amiable a temper as he did on the day following the scene in Fulvia's chamber.

As if the stroke he had dealt him had utterly obliterated the memory of what had gone before, Strozzi seemed in uncommonly high spirits when he met his

henchman in the hall the following morning

The castellan, not knowing just how much, if anything, his terrible master had overheard of his discourse with Donna Fulvia, was ill at ease and looked like a walking arsenal, for he had supplied himself with a number of daggers and poniards, the hilts of which protruded from his belt.

If Strozzi noticed it at all he made no comment, rather did he laud Stiatta for his loyalty to his mistress and, incidentally, to himself, and hinted at future reward when matters should have taken a favorable turn with himself, which he hoped his rising star would soon bring about.

Leaving Stiatta more dumbfounded than if he had visited instantaneous retribution upon him, Strozzi summoned his gondolier and left the gloomy pile to the meditations of a woman and a man, which he knew was a greater torture than anything he could have devised.

From the moment when he had opened his eyes, when his

gaze had been alternately fixed on the woman and the man, both had shivered in a very paroxysm of fear. Neither knew what he had seen, what he had heard. Fulvia, assured by Stiatta of Zuan's safety, was the first to recover from the terror. But three nights remained, and she would forever quit this living hell. Beyond beckoned happiness and peace by the side of the man of her choice. She knew, now or never must she summon all her woman's wiles to lull the suspicions of her gaoler. Had she even vaguely guessed Zuan's plight, she would have succumbed to the terror.

Stiatta had not understated the danger. Strozzi had chosen another to prevent the departure of the man he hated all the more for the wrong he had inflicted upon him, after the castellan had supposedly finished with him. This one had intercepted and consigned him to the doom Strozzi had decreed for him.

That something was impending, even those less accurately informed of their master's mood scented on this morning. Messengers came and went. Notwithstanding Strozzi's outward gayety, an atmosphere of gloom and foreboding pervaded the palace, and seemed to communicate itself to its inmates, like the ever widening circles that start from the spot where a pebble has broken the calm mirror of the water.

Fulvia had locked herself in her chamber, in feverish preparation for her flight. She must accustom herself to the thought of leaving this abode forever. She had not even confided to Stiatta, lest, in a fit of jealousy, he might cross her plans, destroy her every hope.

For, once Strozzi suspected — and perchance he did so even now — all means of escape would be forever cut off. And then, she knew, her doom was sealed forevermore.

Towards evening Strozzi returned and immediately summoned Fulvia to his presence.

The command almost deprived her of her mental balance. How much did Strozzi know? What did he suspect?

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What he would do, having learned that she had lent an eager ear to the plot for his undoing, she trembled even to surmise. Now a sickening terror invaded her. She dared not entirely disavow Stiatta who, whatever his motives, had befriended her. Even thief's loyalty forbade her to sacrifice him to her own safety.

Little did she guess as she took her seat at the board, that her panic was as an open book for Strozzi.

Under the cover of animated conversation he watched her, hawk-like. No fitful blush, no tremor of the lips, no contraction of the eyebrows, no frightened, stealthy glance escaped him. Gradually he turned his discourse to instances of reprisals taken by vengeful husbands on guilty wives or mistresses, and savored to the full the quick terror of her eyes, the involuntary twitching of her fingers.

Eventually, as the purple Montefiasconé flowed more freely, he summoned Stiatta to the board.

The castellan appeared, looking somewhat nonplussed from the one to the other. Never had he been thus honored.

With an awkward exhibition of gratified vanity Stiatta took the seat assigned him at the table, slewing his eyes round towards Fulvia, but meeting with neither recognition nor response.

Fulvia was as one stunned.

What meant this horrible caprice?

Strozzi dining with his menial and compelling her to be present! Never had she considered him capable of so exquisite a piece of cruelty and treachery. If she arose offended, she made of Stiatta as deadly an enemy as he now seemed a staunch friend. If she acquiesced, she shed her pride, which had been her fortress, as one sheds a garment. She submitted to this unheard-of indignity, a circumstance in itself fraught with gravest danger, as it raised the question of the reasons for this sudden change of attitude.

Stiatta himself was so utterly outwitted that he twitched

nervously in his seat, drinking but sparingly of the wine Strozzi placed before him and wondering if his master had fallen upon his dotage, suddenly and untimely, as he devoured the viands and wiped his greasy fingers on his doublet in default of anything better.

The chamber itself was a severe and cheerless apartment. The deep-embrasured, grated windows, overlooking the silent estuary, admitted a murky light that blended ill with the slim lamps on the oaken table. The walls were bare, save for a barbaric reproduction of Virgin and Child in its battered frame, and a panoply of armor. Wolfskins were intermittently strewn upon the stone floor. Two doors served the chamber, the one opening on the corridor, the other leading to Strozzi's private cabinet. From the coffered ceiling depended a heavy, wrought-iron chandelier, evidence, with the massive furniture and chairs, of the sombre taste of the master of the house.

Strozzi had placed Stietta on his left hand, while Fulvia occupied the chair at his right. She wore a brocaded gown, girdled with gold about the waist, which swept the wonderful curves of her body in magnetic folds.

Pensive, barely touching the food which Strozzi, from time to time, laid with his own fingers on her plate, she pondered the sinister import of the scene, which she regarded distrustfully.

"Smile, Donna Fulvia!" Strozzi admonished her. "My star is in the ascendant. My enemy is no more. I am minded to be gay to-night!"

"Smiles do not always come at will," she said, bending her head and disregarding his innuendo.

Strozzi laughed jarringly, a laugh that frightened her, she knew not why, then, leaning over, he threw an arm about her waist.

"Are you a woman to say that? Look up, my beautiful, and smile at my bidding."

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She drew away from him and raised her head.

"I would have you remember, my lord, we are not alone."

Strozzi laughed again.

"As good as alone, my sweet. This excellent Messer Stiatto," at these flattering sounds the castellan became inflated like a poisoned dog, "is he not in my confidence — and in yours? Let his presence trouble you no more than it troubles me."

Taking her head between his hands, he forced her face upward and kissed her on the mouth. She went white to the lips and her eyes flashed fire.

"Consider your own dignity, my lord, if mine be of no consequence in your eyes."

"Dignity? Who prates of dignity in merry company! Let us live to-day. For to-morrow — we die!"

As he spoke these words his eyes were suddenly upon Stiatto who, believing he was in reality the great man his master had pronounced him, had emptied his tankard at a gulp.

"Your sweet lips," Strozzi again turned to the woman who was controlling herself by sheer force of will. For she wondered at the hidden significance of the scene and dared not provoke him now the gates of liberty were beckoning to her.

Nevertheless she shook her head and held up her white hand as if to ward him off.

Strozzi leaned towards her.

"You are hardly politic, my sweet," he observed drily, watching the pair for the slightest sign of understanding.

"I requested a kiss — you refused. In time you may wish to kiss the lips of one who is stark in death! We shall see, Madonna, whose pleasure shall prevail in the end, yours — or mine! Meanwhile I pledge your health — and — death to all traitors!"

Stiatto's hand shook as he raised and sipped of the goblet, while Strozzi, filling his tall Venetian glass to the brim, emptied it at a gulp.

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A vague uneasiness began to assail Stiatta. He cloaked it as best he could under an assumed air of satisfaction over the honor shown to him. But his eyes stealthily consulted Fulvia's, only to drop under Strozzi's insistent gaze. Half unconsciously his fingers stole to the hilt of his dagger and curled round it stealthily. The movement did not escape Strozzi's notice.

"A pretty toy, Messer Stiatta," he said lightly. "May I examine it?"

He held out his hand and the castellan surrendered the weapon. Strozzi examined it and tried the point with his thumb.

"Of Ferrarese workmanship and sharpened to a nicety," he commended with a nod. "A pleasant little tool, forsooth. Look, Fulvia *mia!* Four inches of this narrow blade between the ribs, or under the left shoulder, and you or I would sleep sweetly until the day of doom."

He pricked her white forearm playfully.

"I think a little blood-letting would release the evil humor that oppresses you, Fulvia *mia!* However, I am no barber. A nice little toy — fit for a lady's dressing table!"

Stiatta forced himself to a grimace which might, by a stretch of the imagination, have been called a smile. This playing with edged tools was little to his liking. Strozzi, with a swift glance at him, continued amicably:

"Notwithstanding the earthly dross with which I am encumbered I possess somewhat of the art of divination. Do I not guess aright, excellent Messer Stiatta, that it is your intent to offer to the lady Fulvia this toy — as token of your devotion? You have my permission. It will serve well, my sweet, to provide outlet for an over-rebellious spirit."

Fulvia shuddered at the sardonic tone.

Stiatta stammered assent to his master's clairvoyance.

"So, I was right," Strozzi smiled. "Make your offering, Messer Stiatta. The lady will accept. Or nay — I will take the office upon myself!"

"As my lord wills," stammered Stiatta dazedly. "But I hold myself already favored beyond my deserts. Surely the future can hold nothing better than my lord's condescension."

Strozzi grasped his henchman's hand meditatively and, taking in Stiatta from head to toe, enunciated slowly and distinctly.

"A true word, Messer Stiatta, as you will presently see. A short life and a merry one is the highest gift of the gods. The short life is yours. As to the merriment, that has been your own affair. Do I mistake, or is there not already a shade of greenish pallor on your cheek? In another moment the pains will be upon you."

His voice rang out as in a shriek, sudden, sharp and stern.

"Make your peace with Heaven, Stiatta, for within the hour, as God lives, your carcass will go out of this chamber to feed the fishes of the lagunes."

At the last word the castellan, his features sharpened by a growing alarm, flung himself upon his knees with an abject scream of terror.

"Not so, my lord! Not so! You do but jest —"

"Never a truer jest, Stiatta! You are already a dead man."

"Mercy, my lord! Have mercy!" shrieked the wretch, clutching at Strozzi's knees. "Have but mercy and I will confess all! I will tell you all! I swear by the saints."

Strozzi withdrew himself fastidiously from the unwelcome touch.

"Keep your place, dog! Confess! Of what use is confession to me, who know all?"

Fulvia moistened her dry lips and, more dead than alive, made as though to rise.

Quick as a flash Strozzi shot out a detaining hand.

"Stay you here, Donna Fulvia! I would have you witness a traitor's end. It will be a salutary lesson."

"But, my lord," she protested faintly, "what has this to do with me?"

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"That you know best! Get upon your knees and thank God I deal not with you as with this carrion."

And he spurned Stiatta with the point of his steel boot.

"I cannot bear it," she wailed.

"Bear it, or not! Here you remain, till the end. Look well, Fulvia *mia* — look!"

He was interrupted by a hideous scream. Stiatta had started to his feet and was leaning against his chair, pressing both hands to his stomach, while his eyes bulged from his livid face.

"It is upon me!" he shrieked. "A wolf with fiery teeth is gnawing at my entrails. Mercy, my lord, mercy!"

"As much mercy as you have shown to me!" Strozzi replied.

In an instant the wretch was down again, writhing in agony. Great beads of sweat came out upon his forehead and rolled down his face.

Strozzi looked on in grim aloofness.

Fulvia, dazed by Strozzi's words and the scene she was compelled to witness, gave a moan and screened her eyes with her hands.

Now Stiatta struggled to his knees, screaming mingled prayers and imprecations, now he rolled on the floor clutching the air with distraught fingers. His eyes shone with a glassy lustre. His yellow teeth protruded between his snarling lips.

Strozzi, elbows on table and turning his back to Fulvia, had been watching the contortions of the poor wretch without a trace of emotion on his face.

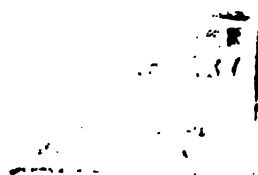
It was more than Fulvia could endure.

She hesitated a moment, breathing deeply. Then her face set in a hard line. Her hand slipped cautiously along the edge of the table till it touched the stiletto. With a firm hand she gripped it, then drawing herself up to her full height, raised her arm to strike.

The next instant the dagger tinkled to the floor as fingers of steel gripped her wrist and forced down the raised arm.



"She staggered away from him paralyzed with terror."



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"Donna Fulvia," Strozzi, towering over her, said with a sneer, "I recommend to your consideration the folly of tampering with destiny. It was not intended that I should die by the assassin's knife."

Fulvia put out her hands shudderingly as she staggered away from him, paralyzed with terror.

Strozzi smiled scornfully.

"Donna Fulvia, you are not of the stuff of which heroines are made."

The mutterings of the poisoned wretch grew fainter and fainter. At last he collapsed face downward and lay still, his fingers twitching upon the stone floor.

One last tremor. Stiatta was dead.

Fulvia staggered from the chamber.

Strozzi struck a gong.

Two servitors appeared.

"The castellan has died of a spasm," he addressed them coldly. "Remove the carcass. It offends my sight!"

His gaze followed their retreating forms.

Then he muttered with a frown:

"The beldame lied. It was short of the hour."

CHAPTER VII

MASKS AND MUMMERS



It was the eve of the Vigil of Corpus Christi, an hour or two before midnight.

The ceaseless lapping of the tide against the palaces bordering the Grand Canal, as the tiny wavelets came in from the Adriatic, or fell with the muted flow of water to the sea, alone broke the silence that brooded over

the estuary of San Marco, the City of the Sea.

The pallid rays of the higher risen moon shone into a gloomy chamber of the Strozzi palace, touching with its ghostly radiance the crimson tapestries interwoven with designs of darker hue, the heavy damask curtains that masked every door and the soft pile of a crimson carpet that muted the footsteps.

A bronze candelabrum of Byzantine workmanship shed a subdued light over the chamber, heightening almost to sultriness the heavy, impregnated air.

The waters of the canal lapped wearily below, in plaintive rhythm. The wavelets, breaking on the steps of the palace, seemed to murmur a dirge for the repose of some departed soul. The distant sound of the sea beyond Malamocco, as its waves broke against the sandy barrier that braved its onslaught, stretching in dreamy solitude from the Lido to Chioggia, was carried hither by the night wind, adding its plaintive voice to the flush of the flowing tide and a deeper note of melancholy to the plaint of the water.

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The chamber seemed to be peopled with shadowy forms that silently came and departed, passing into the shadowy corridor beyond.

One alone stood as if rooted to the floor, one mantled and masked, his arms crossed over the chest, a sombre apparition, the spirit of the gloom. Though his eyes seemed to look into space, in reality his gaze was fixed on the masked door beyond.

A cloud passed over the moon, darkening the crimson hangings to the semblance of a pall, obscuring the figures of the tapestry on the wall.

A second form, shrouded in black from head to toe, now evolved itself out of the shadows of the drapery that masked the opposite door and stood, silently, fixedly, at attention.

His soundless approach seemed to startle the solitary occupant of the chamber, seemed to arouse him from the depths of dark meditations.

"Ah! It is you, Sordello," Strozzi addressed the bravo. "Your feet are fleet —"

"There is but a moment between time and eternity," the bravo replied darkly.

"Enough for the destruction of the universe," Strozzi chimed in with the mood of his gloomy coadjutor. "The hour has come, Sordello, when you must summon the flimsy ghosts of those you have sent butchered to their doom to aid you in the work that is ahead."

Sordello, through the slits of his mask, regarded the speaker with a fixed stare.

"I thought the hour was at hand when the tired blade might rest," he objected feebly.

A fierce gesture came in response.

"You never were an adept at figures, Sordello. A practiced eye, a stout arm and a silent tongue are needed more to-day than ever."

"Are there not worthier men in Venice, who may bask in the sunshine of my lord's favor?" the bravo remonstrated.

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"Are there not arms more steady, eyes keener than mine, that have been dulled from overmuch watching?"

"I fear your modesty blinds you to your virtues," Strozzi interposed luridly. "Some are for the sunlight, some for the shadows, like plants that thrive best when nocturnal planets sail the skies. I can value the arm even in the harm it has wrought. What would you? Confess, turn saint and flaunt a halo?"

The bravo shivered as one in an ague.

"My lord, I am not worthy even to touch the hem of the meanest beggar that crawls in the shadow of the house of God. But — with what meagre means I possess, I mean to purchase masses for the repose of one who has gone from this earth, forever."

Strozzi regarded the speaker darkly.

"Your silken partner in iniquity! You grieve for the death of the wanton who has cheated God and the hangman and myself."

A choked outcry broke from Sordello's lips, while his cold fingers gripped the hilt of his poniard.

"My lord —"

Strozzi made a mock bow.

"What would you, Messer Cut-Throat?" he imitated the bravo's strangled protest.

There was a pause, during which Strozzi narrowly watched the swaying form.

When Sordello remained silent he continued in the same lurid tone:

"Deem you the lady will be canonized and wear the halo of chastity upon her snow-white brow? Perchance she did but escape a worse fate that awaited her in the hovels of her kind," he added brutally, driving the knife deeper into the smarting soul. "Has the lagune given up its dead?"

Sordello drew a sharp breath.

"Her poor body lies in unconsecrated earth. They refused her the last rites of the Church."

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Strozzi gave a shrug.

"As for that," he replied, "she will sleep none the worse. Henceforth you will stand upon your own feet, my man, drive home your steel without the lure of a perfumed prompter. Yet—I would have you be wary. The Three have an ill habit of prying into the business of late wayfarers, and there is nothing so thankless as memory."

Sordello had listened stoically.

"My lord speaks plain."

"To your post! Guard the secret passage as you would your life. Admit none who has not the word. Should another attempt to enter, strike him dead."

"We have need of every man," he concluded, as he strode to a window that overlooked the dark and silent estuary.

The moon was sinking in the west.

Over the Euganeans a storm was brewing.

Now and then a lightning flash illumined the heavy cloud masses that were rising higher and higher, followed at intervals by low rumbling of thunder, that seemed to boom from the bowels of the earth.

Strozzi stepped back from the window.

"A night to consecrate our work, as the work consecrates the night," he turned to the bravo. "The morning shall find a new master in Venice. Can you guess, Sordello, whose brow will grace the Hornéd Bonnet?"

CHAPTER VIII

THE RISEN DEAD



THE moon had gone from the sky and the dark cloud masses that had risen behind the Euganeans, rolled slowly towards the City of the Sea. Now and then a lightning flash illumined the sable sky, revealing the far-off towers of Madonna dell' Orto and the golden cross on the summit of San Giobbé.

A clock boomed in the night.

At the Strozzi palace the first conspirator arrived, knocked for admission, gave the watchword and entered.

A second appeared, then a third and entered like the first. Now came a fourth who knocked.

A door opened soundlessly.

"The word?"

"*Torre Termidor* —"

A hand gripped his arm. The watchword was repeated.

The fourth conspirator entered.

A mantle was lifted from a lantern, that stood on the ground, and from this a circle of light gleamed feebly along the tiled floor, rose faintly to a man's height, but pierced not farther into the upper gloom.

A sable form, shadowy and masked, took up the lantern, while the first remained, and proceeded through the gallery, his footsteps echoing eerily along the discolored walls.

Arrived at a second door he knocked in a peculiar manner. Out of the gloom came a question.

"Whence come you?"

"From San Trovaso."

"Enter!" bade the voice.

Now a door was flung wide, affording a glimpse into an oblong room of considerable extent.

Tapestries of crimson damask covered the walls. A carpet of the same sinister hues deadened the steps, rendering them soundless as the steps of ghosts. An ebony table ranged along the centre of the room.

A candelabrum suspended from the vaulted ceiling shed a soft illumination over the scene.

A fifth came, a sixth, a seventh. All entered the chamber and took their seats, each apart from the other, till the Thirteen was complete.

Now through a door draped in shadows at the farther end of the chamber entered one whose very air proclaimed him the leader of those assembled. Garbed from head to toe in black he seemed the very spirit of the gloom.

After having assured himself that the number of the conspirators was complete, Strozzi addressed the assembled.

In a terse, passion-inflamed harangue he assailed Gradenigo, dwelled upon the tyranny of the nobles, the autocracy of the Three and exhorted his audience to exterminate their oppressors to a man.

Strozzi's harangue was greeted with ominous mutterings of approval, revealing the mood of those with whose aid he hoped to make himself master of the City of the Sea.

Then he began to assign to each his part in the night's business.

To the care of three, whom he chose seemingly at random, the capture of the arsenal was entrusted. Three others with their retainers, were to force their way into the ducal palace, and secure the person of Giovanni Gradenigo, the Doge.

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They leaped to their feet, shouting fiercely, brandishing their daggers, eager for the fray.

Suddenly a door was flung wide and an apparition staggered into the chamber which caused those present to leap to their feet with an outcry of mingled terror and dismay.

Even Strozzi himself betrayed something of the panic that gripped the conspirators, at the sight of the form in the dripping garments that had invaded the chamber.

"A foul deed, my lord," he cried in strident tones, spitting the oily fluid from his mouth, his eyes half shut, the coarse black hair, dripping with water, hanging in disordered strands over his ashen face. "A most foul deed! My gondola was rammed — my gondolier was drowned — I was rescued but in the nick of time —"

Strozzi stared at the speaker, as he would at an apparition. Those who stood next to him noted a convulsive tremor shake his frame.

Through the slits of his mask his dark eyes played over the assembly, taking in each man, wandering from the one to the other.

There was a rustle as of wind among the trees, as the muffled company stirred at the fell announcement. Each turned to scan the other with eyes that flashed fiercely through the slits of their vizors, as though their glances would have burnt a way through the silk that screened their neighbor's countenance.

"Amongst us sits a spy!" Strozzi spoke again. "Thirteen are here. In the place of one there sits another."

A panic had seized those present.

"Who is he?"

"What is his name?"

Strozzi, looking slowly from one to the other, shook his head.

"I know it not — nor how he came —"

"All I know is this," the inexorable voice continued after a

brief pause. "There are thirteen of you — and Crespi lives. One too many! Will no one speak? His murderer has replaced him amongst us — "

No answering voice replied.

"It is then, as I said!" Strozzi continued. "The man who became possessed of the secret of our plot sits amongst us — "

Again there was that rustling stir, and several voices were raised, harsh and hot with threats.

"Thirteen of you are assembled here," the inexorable voice spoke for the third time. "One of you was drowned. Yet thirteen are here. One too many. That one," he concluded raising his voice, "we must weed out."

Again his eyes strayed from one to the other.

The silence became oppressive in its ominous intensity.

Strozzi's voice was strained, as he turned to those assembled.

"I shall ask you, one by one, to confer with me apart," he announced. "Each of you will come when summoned. I shall call you, not by name, but by the region of the city whence you come. You, in turn, will reply with your names."

"San Fantino!" The name boomed mournfully on the chilly air.

A masker rose upon the instant, thrusting back his chair and walked resolutely down to confer with the master plotter.

"San Cassiano!"

A second arose and passed the returning San Fantino on his way.

"San Samuelé!"

"Sant' Andrea!"

"San Mosé!"

To each name a masker responded and returned.

Eleven had passed to Strozzi.

"San Gregorio!"

It was the call of the twelfth.

Strozzi was reserving Crespi's region for the last. The

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half-drowned man had dropped upon the floor in a wet, repulsive heap.

"San Trovaso!"

There was something in the summons that held the sentence of death in its inflection.

With ringing steps the man from San Trovaso walked down the chamber, until he faced Strozzi.

"San Trovaso!" Strozzi questioned the thirteenth conspirator.

There was a moment's pause, like the deep hush that precedes the breaking of the storm.

Clear and incisive the answer came.

"The Leopard Prince!"

A terrible outcry re-echoed through the chamber, bringing all conspirators to their feet.

Strozzi's hand leaped to his sword.

"What hellish deceit is this?"

"Shall I repeat my name to your grace?" he from San Trovaso replied ironically, tearing away his mask.

Strozzi staggered against the table, as if he had seen a corpse, as he stared into the face of Zuan Castello.

"You — the Leopard Prince?"

"At your service, my lord," Zuan replied mockingly, at the same time producing the signet of the Doge.

When no answer came forth, he raised aloft his right hand, in which gleamed an unsheathed sword.

"I am here to deliver a message, intended for your ears, my lords! Are you ready to listen?"

There was a strange and terrible silence, broken by Strozzi's strident mirth.

"Listen, my lords! A prophet is amongst us, twice arisen from the dead!"

"A prophet, indeed, who has yet a word to speak to you, Lucio Strozzi," Zuan thundered, advancing a step towards him.

"To me?" Strozzi shouted, a strange light in his eyes.
"To me?"

"To you, upon whose head is about to be visited the punishment of a traitor, a felon, a libertine! You, who have betrayed friend and foe alike, who have outraged every law, human and divine, will stand ere dawn at the bar of judgment, to give up your black soul to the doom that awaits you."

Strozzi answered with an oath.

"Fool! Deem you to scare us like children? I tell you, that ere dawn streaks the skies neither you nor one of your menials shall live to tell their tale. Upon him! Hack him to pieces!"

Zuan leaped to the door.

Thrice he beat upon it with the hilt of his poniard.

A terrific blow from without shattered all three doors simultaneously. Across the threshold of the central door strode the leader of the Dalmatians. Behind him and through the side doors came some three score men-at-arms, armed cap-a-pie.

Three paces within the room the great, armed giants halted and surveyed the company with eyes that gleamed grimly from their bearded faces.

"By order of the Leopard Prince!" Sordello turned to the dumbfounded leader of the conspirators, extending his arm, while his eye sought the eye of Zuan.

"You — Sordello — in the hire of my enemies?" Strozzi stammered, receding step for step from the bravo.

"Your sword, my lord," Sordello spoke grimly. "It is much too long for the place that awaits you."

"One by one!"

Ere the conspirators realized their fate, they were overpowered, bound and gagged.

"How many have we?" Zuan turned to Sordello.

"Thirteen," the latter replied after a count.

"Strozzi has escaped!" Zuan thundered. "These carrion do not matter! Dead or alive we must have him!"

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Sordello and a score of sbirri darted away in different directions.

A strange silence reigned in the chamber, broken by the precipitate entrance of the Chief of the Signori di Notte.

"My lord," he turned to Zuan, in dismay, "the Princess Yaga cannot be found. My men surrounded her palace. She and her attendants have escaped."

Ere Zuan's ear grasped the tidings a sudden cry of dismay rang from the corridor without.

A man-at-arms came rushing into the chamber, from which the conspirators, bound and gagged, to prevent any alarm, were being taken to the waiting boats, manned by the Signori di Notte.

He was shaking with fear.

"The Phantom Gondola is upon the lagunes, my lord. The lord Strozzi had escaped —"

Zuan seemed too utterly stunned to grasp the tidings.

Two thought flashes pierced his brain: Fulvia and Venice.

"A six-oared *sandolo*! The swiftest! It is a race with death! We have one chance to win!"

CHAPTER IX

THE PURSUIT



THE *sandolo* answered to the rapid strokes of the oars and moved forward quickly, at the fierce bidding of six arms. The *calli* were sombre and deserted. Men feared to face the tempest that raged over the City of the Sea, though the narrow sheltered canals hardly felt the violence of the storm that was raging with increased fury overhead. The high walls of the houses shut in the black water that surged with the rising tide. From a window, here and there, streamed a lurid light which struck the surface of the Rio with a dancing gleam, momentarily revealing the sombre craft as it passed, or, catching an answering flash from the *ferro*, as it plunged once more into the oily gloom.

Above, in the grey-black night, the heavy thunderclouds raced hurriedly, torn into a thousand fantastic shapes by the violence of the storm, flash following flash, crash succeeding crash.

"*Stai! Stai!*" came the warning shout, when a sharp corner was to be turned. The gondola sped on its course. A dull thud; a splash, silence! What was it? A black thing dropped from an upper window, and disappeared in the water.

Zuan wondered if it was a human body thus disposed of. All manner of crime seemed possible in the mysteriousness of

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these solitary *calli*, where the waters were as reticent as the confessional, and the recipient of as many foul secrets.

"On! On!"

Zuan peered through the darkness, hoping to catch a glimpse of his quarry. His spirit rose with the excitement of the chase. The oars creaked in the curved thole-pins. The water splashed to their beating. The wind shrieked down the side canals, tearing the crests of the tiny waves into showers of spray. It drove the *sandolo* madly on its course, as if joining in the chase. The gondoliers' frequent cries of warning, as they neared and swung round a corner in undiminished and unequalled skill, were caught by the storm and carried away in weird echoes.

At last the gondola emerged into an open space and, by the gleam of the lightnings, Zuan saw a mass of floating timber, groaning as the logs touched each other, swaying with the tide on the wind-swept water.

There was a momentary lull in the storm.

Suddenly Zuan touched the arm of his taciturn companion and pointed into the darkness ahead.

"There it is! We are in time! On! On!"

Even as he spoke, he turned.

"Where is Sordello?"

The Chief of the Signori di Notte pointed grimly ahead.

"In yonder boat — with Strozzi."

The two exchanged meaning glances. The bravo at least would not be cheated of his revenge, whatever fate decreed.

The gondoliers strained their utmost to gain on the phantasmal craft, that seemed to fly over the waves as if impelled by a thousand oars. The beam, through the eyeless sockets of a death's head, glowed angrily through the mist.

With a rushing sound the pursuers followed in its wake.

The wind had steadily increased in fury and the storm was now at its height. To go before it was their only hope, to battle against it was certain destruction. A roar filled the air.

The spray was carried in clouds of blinding mist. The men in the *sandolo* made their voices heard with difficulty. A sea-gull was borne helpless overhead and carried landwards. The gondoliers could hardly stand to their oars. At long intervals there were brief moments of relative calm, when the roar of the waves could be heard from afar and faint bell tones came fitfully out of the night like a lost prayer to the hidden stars.

It was a night when the fiends were abroad and seemed to have devoted themselves to the task of destruction.

Zuan urged the gondoliers to redoubled efforts and the *sandolo* sped through the inky blackness of the seething estuary.

There came another lull in the storm. The wind had abated and, shifting to northward, had rapidly collected clouds in dark masses overhead which took the form of immense mountains towering above the City of the Sea. Electrical discharges played incessantly among the innermost recesses of these nebulous depths, giving them a lurid appearance as of the nether world.

With phantom swiftness they gathered and met over the City of the Sea.

Flash after flash came from the ominous clouds overhead.

Peal upon peal burst on all sides.

Venice was enveloped in pervading flame.

Fire played round her cupolas and domes, campanili and bell-towers. Fire glanced from the marble balconies of her palaces. Fire flashed from her countless windows. Fire danced on the water, cresting the waves with lambent flame. The whole world seemed ablaze and the roar in the air was deafening to the ear.

To Zuan it became evident that the crest of the storm had yet to be weathered ere they could hope to overtake the spectral craft that eluded their pursuit with fiendish cunning. It seemed to be heading straightway for the abandoned shores of the Dead Lagoon, a region shunned by gondolier or fisherman alike, after nightfall.

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Zuan spurred the rowers, whose strokes were imperceptibly slackening, to a last supreme effort.

Now the phantom craft hove fully into sight.

The white beam through the eyeless socket pierced angrily through the heaving vapors of the seething estuary.

There was a brief interval of darkness and silence.

Suddenly a blaze of forked fire darted to the sea, followed by an appalling crash of thunder, as if the whole world had been rent to atoms.

The rowers of the *sandolo* muttered prayers to the saints.

The Phantom Gondola had vanished in the depths of the sea.

CHAPTER X

THE ENCOUNTER



AT the appointed hour Fulvia had made her escape from the Strozzi palace. She had entered the waiting gondola which conveyed her to Madonna dell' Orto. There she had dismissed the gondolier, entered the sanctuary and knelt in prayer. Much was dark to her of what had gone before, and now she was in the throes of an anxiety that caused her to start at every sound.

If Strozzi should triumph after all! If her lover's plans should suffer defeat! It was unthinkable! Hardly the grave would prove a refuge!

Her decision was made. There remained but the choice between the convent and death. She prayed for strength to bear what the hour would bring.

The flickerings of distant lightnings and the sullen mutterings of thunder added to her misgivings. Night and all the evils hatched in her bosom seemed arrayed against her. She dared not falter now. One false step and her doom was upon her.

From the steeples of Venice pealed the gongs of midnight, when Fulvia, wrapt in a dark mantle, stood before the statue of the moving Madonna. Her trembling hands found the hidden spring. Conquering her terror she entered the shaft and, lighting a small copper lantern she carried concealed in

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the folds of her mantle, she made her way through a succession of cellars towards the door which had closed upon her life and happiness five long years ago when Strozzi's sbirri had carried her, in a swoon induced by the tidings of disaster, to the palace of her tormentor.

Suddenly Fulvia gave a start.

Her watchful ear had surprised a sound as of a muffled footfall upon the flags. For a moment her heart stood still from sheer terror. At the next she thought she could hear its furious beating even through the stillness.

Pausing in her advance she strained every nerve to listen.

Silence had succeeded. But, a moment after, she heard the sound again.

Now a subtle perfume was wafted to Fulvia's nostrils, of a pronounced oriental flavor. Every fibre strung taut, she peered into the well of darkness.

For a moment she stood still, as if taking council of herself.

Then her fear fell from her as a mantle.

Extinguishing the lantern, she groped testingly forward till a faint, hazy radiance met her gaze.

Again she paused, her white hands pressed against her bosom.

Slowly, on tiptoe, she made her way towards the circle of radiance, till she came to the entrance of a sepulchral vault. Beyond this lay the door that led into the Buen Retiro of her dreams.

On the threshold she paused with a quick intake of her breath.

In the centre of the vault, her back turned to Fulvia, stood a woman. A torch, placed in a projection of the stone, shed a faint and dismal illumination over the scene. Its fitful light, flickering beneath a long pennant of smoke, seemed to enhance the beauty of the nocturnal creature, who had stooped to take from an aperture in the stone floor what appeared to be a sealed package. The extracted stone with the infinitesimal iron ring lay beside it.

Placing her copper lantern on the floor, Fulvia stood immobile, as if turned to stone. In one lightning flash the import of the scene pierced to her brain. So absorbed was the other woman in her furtive task that she never guessed the vault held another but herself.

Suddenly, as if obeying some hidden impulse, she turned.

Both women faced each other, tall, erect, their eyes a challenge, their lips a taunt.

Neither spoke. They seemed to appraise each other. Neither flinched under the gaze of the other.

Yaga was clad in a tight-fitting, gold-embroidered tunic of green, that revealed the exquisite contours of her body, enhanced the roundness of the full throat, the sheen of the wonderful arms and hands. Fulvia appeared a sable figure by contrast with the exotic apparition. But the fairness of the face, the whiteness of the hands and arms, where the loose sleeve had fallen back, made her an opponent to be reckoned with, and Yaga paled, perchance for the first time, before that which she read in the other woman's eyes.

But the wild, untamed thing within her that would not be subdued leaped to the encounter without counting the cost. At last she stood face to face with the woman who had dared to contest with her the man she loved. They were alone, woman to woman, in this subterranean vault. Fate itself had it so decreed.

Fulvia's hand went out.

"Give to me what you have taken!"

At the sound of her voice, Yaga turned white as lightning.

"Am I standing face to face with the Countess Strozzi?"

"I am Fulvia Zudeneghi!"

Yaga's white hand tightened about its prey.

"Oh, how I have longed for you!"

"And I for you!"

Fulvia's mantle fell from her, a black, swishing heap. She faced her opponent taut, lithe, unafraid.

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The sight of her rival, as eager for the encounter as herself, sent the blood dancing through Yaga's veins. Her memory went back to an hour in the past, when in a locked chamber in the castle of Ragusa another had faced her like this, another, beautiful and spirited, with whom she had been locked in a duel to the death.

Fulvia was a match for her in body and spirit. She would destroy her, or be destroyed by her rival's white hands. A fit ending whichever befell.

Fulvia's eyes were on a level with those of the beautiful Magyar.

"Give to me what you have taken!"

Yaga laughed scornfully.

"Who are you to pit your will against mine?"

"I am Fulvia Zudeneghi," came the inexorable reply, "and I demand these scrolls."

There was an expression in Yaga's eyes that caused Fulvia to impose upon herself an almost superhuman restraint, not to leap at her throat and strangle her.

"Fulvia Zudeneghi — from the green isle of Arbé," Yaga purred, lingering on the hated name. "Yet all Venice holds the beautiful Countess Strozzi can defend her right to the title, whatever it implies, a reward earned by untiring devotion — and something more —"

There was something in Fulvia's eyes that caused Yaga to stop with an expressive shrug.

Her determination to detain Yaga till Zuan should arrive began to prove an almost insupportable strain upon her. The Magyar princess dared not leave this place with the state documents in her possession, which, as her quick intuition informed her, spelled Zuan's vindication or the ruin of Venice, once they fell into the hands of the Ban of Bosnia.

Yaga would never give them up of her own free will. The attempt to take them from her would embroil her in a duel to the death with the beautiful Magyar, who had this very

thing in mind. And though Fulvia, stung in the very depths of her soul by Yaga's taunts, longed for the encounter as fervently as did the other woman, there were graver considerations at stake, and her heart was filled with dire misgivings.

Nevertheless her voice was curt and incisive.

"The scrolls —"

Yaga measured her beautiful opponent from head to foot.

"Take them then. What are we waiting for?"

Advancing quite close to Fulvia she paused, her shoulder almost touching the other woman's, while a veiled challenge sank into Fulvia's eyes.

All the hatred she bore this beautiful, sinuous creature, when first she had set eyes upon Yaga at the regatta, surged up in Fulvia anew. She could not but admit, beautiful as she was herself, she had never laid eyes on woman as beautiful as Yaga. The exquisite face, framed in a wealth of amber hair, the classic contours, the agate sheen of the wonderful arms and hands — an amber witch, she seemed, flying away with the souls of men.

All the misery of the past flooded back upon her, in the silent boast of this woman, of having possessed her lover. When she saw in her hand the double-edged tool of their undoing, she could hardly restrain herself from strangling this beautiful, evil thing, even though she perished herself in the struggle.

Yaga's taunting eyes seemed to force her to a decision.

Fulvia carefully weighed her words.

"You came here like a thief in the night, for the second time, to rob the man I love of his honor."

Her hand reached out for the scroll.

Yaga gripped Fulvia's white wrist as in a vise of steel.

Her touch stung the other woman like a whip lash. Fulvia went white to the lips.

"What are your lovers to me, Donna Fulvia? Once I have taken your lover from you. In my arms he forgot heaven and

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earth and that there was such a one as you. I shall take him from you again!"

Fulvia's restraint was ebbing fast. Releasing herself with an effort she faced the beautiful Magyar with heaving bosom and eyes alight with the desire for the conflict.

Yaga, as if she had fathomed her mood continued tauntingly:

"Who are you to cross my path, to come between me and that which I desire?"

Fulvia was very pale.

"I will not bandy words with the paramour of the Ban," she said, in her low, vibrant tone, that stung Yaga to the quick. "You boast of having possessed the man I love. Women of your kind give nothing for nothing. What was your price?"

Yaga was now thoroughly aroused. Not guessing the reasons for Fulvia's presence, her intuition was not slow to inform her the other woman would never permit her to leave the vault with her loot. The quicker she forced the issue, the better. Fulvia would oppose her going. A touch of those white fingers, the fatal leap—the rest lay in the hand of fate.

Her untamed nature leaped to the conflict with her beautiful and fearless rival, whose marble calm her taunts seemed not to have disturbed. Yaga knew the outwardly calmest women are the most to be feared. The temptation to vanquish Fulvia, woman to woman, here, in this subterranean vault, was not to be resisted. Fulvia, too, fathomed Yaga's mood. She would never persuade her to give up the scrolls. Utterly unafraid she welcomed whatever the moments to come would bring.

For a moment they faced each other in a white silence.

It was Yaga who spoke.

[Her eyes, her lips, her every gesture, were a challenge.

"Ask him, who for the love of these arms, bartered and betrayed the secrets of his country!"

"It is a lie!"

Yaga went white to the lips. Her arms grew tense as those of a wrestler about to close with his opponent.

At last Fulvia had leaped to her challenge.

"You dare?"

"It is a lie!"

A voice came echoing from space.

"It is a lie!"

Both women, in the act of leaping at each other, turned their eyes almost simultaneously in the direction whence the voice had come. Then both grew rigid as the dead.

In the frame of the secret door, which had soundlessly turned upon its hinges, lighted by the cressets of a score of giant Africans, surrounded by the halberds and spears of the mailed Dalmatians, stood a sable form wrapt in a long, black mantle, upon which in sinister crimson stood out the dreaded device of Three Leopards Rampant.

Yaga seemed to have turned to stone.

"The Leopard Prince!" she muttered under her breath, then stared, trembling, silent, paralyzed.

The sombre form slowly entered the vault. All the color fled from Yaga's face as he spoke, and in her eyes there was a great fear.

"Princess Yaga," he turned to the beautiful Magyar, "I bring you tidings of great joy. The Magyar king has signed a truce with the Republic. Giacomo Gradenigo and his victorious galleys have delivered Arbé from your master, the Ban. His hordes are slain or scattered in wild flight. As for him, who in life bore the name of Lucio Strozzi," the speaker raised his voice, "Heaven has adjudged! He and his phantom crew are at the bottom of the sea. Even to the last he cheated the hangman. Your master requires your services no longer, Princess, and these scrolls, stolen from one who had guarded them as his life, one night in the past by a miscreant and archtraitor who stands even now at the bar

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of judgment, are safer in the keeping of the Venetian State. A galley lies in waiting to take you across the estuary of San Marco. You are free to depart, Princess Yaga. Venice does not war with women!"

The speaker raised his hand.

The ranks of the Dalmatians parted, to clear a passage for the Magyar princess. Two men-at-arms approached to conduct her to the waiting gondola.

As the masked speaker strode to the side of Fulvia, who had witnessed the scene, dazed, wide-eyed, uncomprehending, he was conscious of an apparition that passed him in the half-gloom like a vision in the night, a dreamy face, calm, fearless, beautiful, her eyes beaming a silent, defiant farewell.

Under the arch of the door she paused for a moment and, with a backward glance over her shoulder, challenged Fulvia with her eyes.

Removing his mask Zuan placed an arm about Fulvia, while the Signori di Notte, the *sbirri*, the Dalmatians and the Africans with their flaming cressets stood in a semi-circle around.

"Is it indeed yourself, Zuan, wonder of wonders," Fulvia stammered, her eyes upturned to his. Then she tottered as if about to fall.

Zuan's arm encircled the swaying form.

As his name came fluttering from her pallid lips, it breathed an immensity of wonder and exultation, as if she were addressing a vision. Her very soul seemed to reverse itself. The heavy encumbrance seemed to have fallen to unknown depths, while there came to the surface something light and luminous, that dilated into a glorious dome like a morning sky, and she saw her own life and the life of the world about her transfigured and changed. An infinitely tender smile hovered on her lips that quivered like rose leaves in the wind.

"All the misery is gone — all the terror has vanished, since I have you again," she crooned. "Years and their events have passed without touching that part of my soul which I

have kept inviolate for you. But — what does it all mean?" she continued, as if waking from a dream, brushing a stray lock of hair from the white brow. "This authority — this robe — this crest?"

Zuan gazed long into the face of his beloved.

"It was granted the Leopard Prince to avenge the wrongs of Zuan Castello."

Then he turned to those who had witnessed the scene in vague, uncomprehending wonder.

"To the Palace of the Doge! Let the bells proclaim it to the people. Again the Lion of San Marco has triumphed over his foes, and Venice sits enthroned upon her isles."

THE END











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